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*The*  
GORGEOUS  
BORGIA



JUSTIN HUNTLY MCCARTHY



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LAVINELLA'S ANSWER WAS TO DRAW A DAGGER FROM HER  
BOSOM AND EXTEND IT TO CAESAR

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THE  
GORGEOUS BORGIA

A ROMANCE

BY

JUSTIN GRANTLY MCCARTHY.

WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR.  
AND A FOREWORD BY THE EDITOR.



NEW YORK AND LONDON.  
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS  
MCMIX



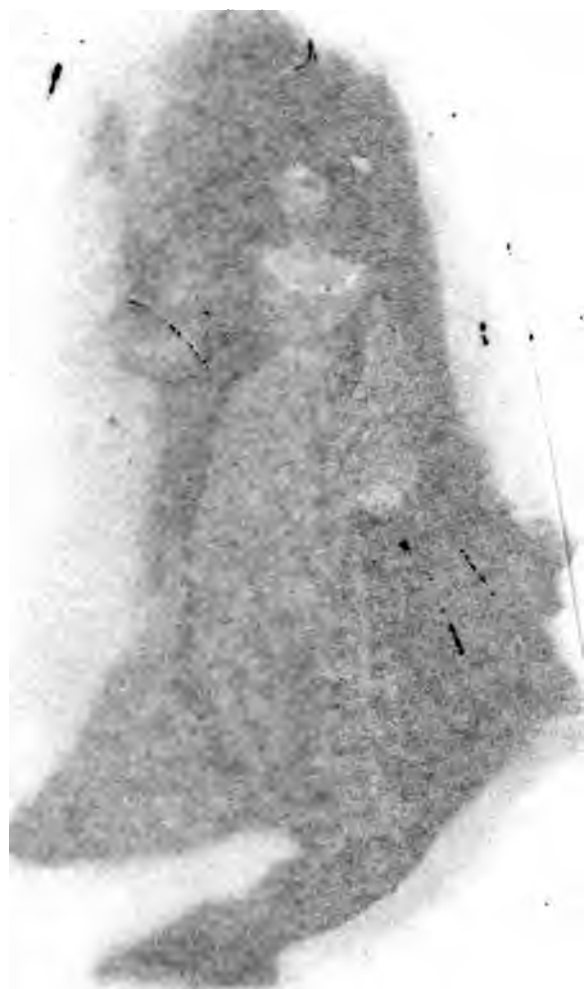


FIG. 1. A. LAGUNA, 1954. A. LAGUNA, 1954. A. LAGUNA, 1954.

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THE  
GORGEOUS BORGIA

A ROMANCE

*J. S. Carey*

BY

JUSTIN HUNTLY MCCARTHY

AUTHOR OF

"THE DUKE'S MOTTO" "SERAPHICA"  
"IF I WERE KING" "THE PROUD PRINCE"  
ETC. ETC.

*1910*



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JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

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**BOOK I**

**A NIGHT IN THE LIFE OF CÆSAR BORGIA**



# THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

## I

“JUMP, BORGIA, JUMP!”

THE day had been jovial in Rome—the ruddy morning was jovial, the golden afternoon was jovial, the blue-and-yellow moonlit night was still jovial. It was the anniversary of a festival always dear to the Roman people, and always celebrated by them with much rejoicing and all manner of cheer. The festivities lasted from day-dawn well into the night, when parties of pleasure drifted hither and thither through the intricacies of the sacred city, singing and dancing, shouting and capering, by the light of innumerable flambeaux and lanterns, as gayly as if the world had grown no older since the days of Romulus. To an uninstructed stranger walking through Rome that night it would well have seemed as if there were no cares to vex any hearts in Rome, no frowns to furrow any Roman brow—as if no man’s pulses ever throbbed



## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

with anger at the thought of the Spaniard who was master in the Vatican, as if no eye ever dimmed with sorrow for the great Roman families oppressed or exiled. What did it matter, the gay carriage of the populace seemed to suggest, as they danced and sang and flashed their torches—what did it matter if the Orsini and the chiefs of other great houses were banished men hiding for their lives in distant towns of Italy with heavy prices on their head? What did it matter if foreigners ruled in Rome, foreigners whose names had become a byword beyond the walls of the city, beyond the mountain walls of the peninsula, in every court of Europe, for greed and grasping ambition and the gratification of amazing vices? What did it matter if men spoke below their breaths, not daring to raise their angry voices, of the hideous sins and unnatural lusts with which flame-tongued rumor credited their rulers. What did it matter if the Red Bull of the Borgias, more dreadful idol than the Calf of Gold, trampled with bloody, merciless hoofs on all that was good and brave and chaste and true in Rome? What did it matter? On this day of festival, at least, there were other things to think about than the bitter bread of exile and the heavy hand of oppression and the cruel eyes of tyrants. There was dance, there was song, there was torchlight, there was merry eating and merry drinking and merry-making of music and merrymaking of love. Let us

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eat, then, and drink, then, and sing, then, and give sour thoughts the go-by. So parties of revellers frolicked hither and thither in all directions, flinging the gleam of their lanterns and the sound of their laughter through the darkened streets, penetrating, some of them, in their heedless jollity, to the farthest, the loneliest, and the darkest corners of Rome.

One of the farthest, loneliest, and darkest corners of Rome was a truly dim and even dismal place hard by the edge of the Tiber, a place that was never lively even in the brightest noon, that showed as melancholy as a cemetery even on the fairest eve, and that appeared in its sullen isolation to defy the moonlight and the starlight of the brightest night. It lay at the foot of one of the seven hills, so that those who sought it, coming from the upper Rome, had to descend to its level by queer, tortuous, stairway-like streets that were steep enough to stagger unsteady heads in daylight, and that seemed, indeed, little less than precipitous at dusk. Everything about the place looked ancient, decayed, deserted. Its desolation was not unhappily emphasized and accentuated by the crumbling curve of what had once been a stately Roman archway and by the few remaining pillars of what had once been a noble Roman temple. Mirth and cheerfulness and well-being seemed to have vanished from the spot as completely as the patricians

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whose pride the arch had once commemorated and the deities whose worship the temple had once enshrined. The glory of the ancient city, the glory of the living city, had yielded in that sombre spot to the dominion of gloom. Gloomiest of objects in that gloomy place, a huge wall rose foursquare to heaven, like the high, blind wall of a prison, grim, sinister, menacing. Only in spring and summer the leafy tops of trees and the struggling splash of color at the top of the stern pile of stones, where some trailing roses and pomegranate blossoms swayed, revealed to the interested passers-by, if any such there might ever be in the abandoned place, that behind the forbidding barrier some kind of garden flourished.

Yet, even to this cheerless region on this night of festival, certain revellers found their way. They had drifted along by the side of the Tiber in their genial pilgrimage of pleasure, and now in the moonlight they came, bearing from the river-bank, through the ruined arch into the ill-paved, grass-grown space which lay under the brooding shadow of the gaunt wall. In streamed the leaping flood of laughing men and women, gayly dressed, bright with wine, noisy with clash of cymbals, slap of tambourines, rattle of bells, squeal of pipes, and twang of lutes, and heralded fantastically by the shadows thrown by their torches, that seemed to brawl grotesquely with the shadows cast by the

## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

moonlight. One of the number of the roisterers, a man that was very fat and very jolly, who might have stood to a painter or a sculptor for the Genius of Good Living, the symbolic image of the gratified flesh, had brought with him a big and brightly colored ball of strained skin, which, as he flung it from him to the ground, rebounded quickly and was struck at amid screams of mirth by the hands and feet of his companions, wassailers and wantons, so that it leaped this way and that way and provoked inextinguishable hilarity.

So gay and childish was the absorption of the players in their pastime that the minds of the merry-makers were innocent of cares, clear from all suspicion of neighboring danger. So dark and so profound was the shadow which the vast wall cast over that region of desolation that the flam-beaux of the merry-makers did but little to dissipate it, and wholly failed to reveal to their heedless glances certain dark, silent, motionless presences that were ranged against the stones, so still and rigid that they might almost have been parts of its architecture, effigies set there like the Atlantides of old days to bear up the weight of some monumental mass. If any one of these merry-makers had spoken his thoughts aloud they would have run into words something after this fashion, "Here, surely, if anywhere in Rome, a man might speak his mind and bid fear of tyranny go hang." Here,

## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

therefore, the ball-players, blithe and cheaply defiant, wagged their tongues.

The fat man had caught the ball on a return, and was hugging it to his portly belly—gaudy globe against gaudy globe. The others screamed at him to give them more sport. "Throw it into the air again, good Banda!" they shouted, and the fat man held up the painted sphere in triumph.

"My ball," he cried, "is as swollen as the Pope and as pompous as the pride of the Borgias!" He dropped it to his feet as he spoke and gave it a brisk kick that sent it soaring. Other hands and other feet reached at it as it yearned to earth again. One youth, whose attire was superfine, and whose weak face grinned maliciously as he spurned the ball and sent it skipping, cried to another that he wished his foot were as potent to kick the real Borgia down-stairs.

The other turned to him and caught at his boast somewhat scornfully. "They say your uncle has a foot which itches in such a fashion, Messer Ugo."

Ugo shrugged his shoulders. "My uncle," he said, "is a man of peace, Messer Ilario. He keeps his foot for his cushion. I wish he had more spirit."

Another youth mocked at him. "If the most illustrious Cardinal Rovere had his nephew's courage, the Borgias would not sit so snug."

Ugo took the challenge seriously. "Some day,

## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

Messer Lucumo," he said, swelling his breast, "I shall make it my duty to talk to Cæsar, and I do not think that Cæsar will greatly enjoy my words. Oh yes, my time will come sooner or later, and when it comes I shall make the most of it. I shall point out to his mightiness his faults, his blunders, and his crimes. I shall read him a lesson, I promise you."

The others laughed, some in sympathy with, some in mockery of, such vamping. The one that had addressed the vaper turned away with a sneer on his face. "Will you so, mountain-mouse?" he muttered. And still those rigid figures hidden in the shadow against the wall kept their rigidity and their peace. Now the fat man had caught the ball again and flung it anew to the ground, saying, "Jump, Borgia, jump!"

As the ball capered gayly into the silvered blueness of the air, one of the still, silent figures detached itself from the wall against which it leaned and came slowly forward into the midst of the ball-players. A sinister figure, cloaked from head to heel in black, he stood with folded arms surveying the startled revellers, who fell away from him amazed.

The cloaked man spoke, and his voice was at once grim and insolent, ringing with a cold mockery and a cold menace. "Who makes so free with the name of Borgia?" he asked, commandingly.

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There was something so sudden and uncanny about this unexpected apparition that all merriment began to fade from the faces of the revellers, and while the women huddled together in explicable alarm, even the boldest of the men felt a quick chilling of the pulses. But the fat, jolly fellow that had been the leader in the ball-playing was something drunker and in consequence something bolder than his comrades, and he answered the threatening stranger's question with a vinous dignity. "May not a man speak the name of Borgia now?" he asked. Then he marred his dignity with a hic-cough.

The man in black spoke again as grimly as before. "I think you likened the Borgia to a ball?" There was a kind of cruel politeness in his speech and manner that seemed horrible to hear, horrible to witness.

The fat man held his ball toward the new-comer as if for approbation. "This is a fine ball," he protested—"the king of balls. The Borgia is a fine man—the king of men. Therefore they are both alike, ball and Borgia."

The man in black looked gravely at the speaker and seemed to stare his courage out of him, though all that Banda could see in the shifting lights was a swarthy face and truculent eyes. "Messer Banda, you were best in bed," the hostile voice said, quietly.

Messer Banda's bacchic mood was somewhat

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sobered by this surprising recognition of his identity. "You know me?" he stammered, suddenly dashed—he knew not why—strangely at a loss.

The man in black answered, almost cheerfully, as one that enjoys his victim's discomfort: "I know you, Messer Banda Bentivoglio. I know everybody; I know everything. It is my business. Get to bed."

But at this point in the argument Ugo da Rovere felt that it became him, after his recent vamping, to assert himself. He advanced with something of a valorous swagger toward the intruder, and addressed him with an air of bantering urbanity. "Is it your business to stifle mirth and wear a graveyard face for folly?"

The intruder recognized him as he had recognized his friend. "Messer Ugo da Rovere," he answered, "get to bed. I say the same," he went on, looking at each of the foremost young men in turn and naming him by his name, "to you, Messer Ilario da Lucumo, and to you, Messer Prospero Colonna, and to you, Messer Silvio Savelli, and to you, Messer Luigi da Pitigliano. Get you to bed, all of you. I want this place for my reflections."

As he spoke he threw open and tossed back his long black cloak, so that it swung over his shoulders and revealed a richly colored jerkin, upon which was depicted in silken needle-work a coat of arms.



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This coat of arms represented a red bull upon a yellow field, and underneath it in gold thread was worked the word "CÆSAR." Ugo da Rovere staggered backward as he recognized the familiar and dreaded insignia, the familiar and dreaded name.

He caught Banda by the arm. "He is of the Borgia household," he whispered, hoarsely. "Best obey him."

The man who carried the arms of Borgia and the name of Cæsar on his breast looked round upon the company with a mocking smile. "Get to bed, Messer Ilario da Lucumo," he recommended; "get to bed, Messer Prospero Colonna; get to bed, Messer Silvio Savelli; get to bed, Messer Luigi da Pitigliano." While the man again mentioned each name in turn he seemed to taste as he did so a malignant satisfaction in noting that its owner grew visibly paler in the flaring lights. These were brave men that hated the Borgias, and with good cause; but knowledge of the past gave them fear for the future, and they dreaded, with reason, to be proclaimed as Cæsar's enemies. So they held their peace and shivered, and again Ugo plucked at Banda's sleeve. "Come away," he said.

But Banda was for bettering the situation. He advanced toward the man who carried the name of Cæsar on his breast and made him a humble salutation. "Honored sir," he protested, thickly, "my love is ever at your lord's feet."

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The Borgian adherent repeated his laconic command, "Get to bed," and as if to indorse it the more effectively he made a slight gesture as of summons, whereat some half a dozen other silent, black-cloaked figures detached themselves from the darkness of the wall and advanced to join him. This was enough and more than enough to destroy any lingering obstinacy on the part of the now deeply dejected revellers. With unquestioning obedience and wellnigh ignominious speed they hastened from the spot, some hurrying through the archway and some up the narrow, twisted stairways, their one wish being to get as soon as possible out of sight of the myrmidons of Borgia. As they went, however, in a last assertion of courage, they struck up their songs and their music afresh, and the light women began to laugh lightly, and the rippling of the laughter and the tinkling of the instruments and the voicing of the forced carols quavered here and wavered there as they trickled off into the night seeking gayer, less dangerous neighborhoods in which to give vent to their merriment, if happily it might rekindle. As they went they promised themselves, very confidently, to keep the discreetest guard upon their tongues for the future in any place, no matter how lonely it looked, where by any human possibility any agent of the Borgias might lurk and listen.

## II

### “NOT AGAINST A BORGIA!”

WHEN the dispirited roisterers had vanished, when the last lilt of their voices had died away in the distance, when the last gleam of their torches had disappeared, and the place was dim and quiet again, one of the later figures spoke to him who had dispersed the company.

“Michelotto,” he said—“Michelotto, the doves flutter at the name of the hawk.”

Michelotto answered, grimly: “My good Grifone, there is no man so hot-blooded but his pulse will cool at a breath of our Borgia. Our Borgia is as beautiful as a tiger and as bright as a tiger and also as strong as a tiger, and truly as cruel as a tiger.”

Messer Michelotto Corella had not looked at the wild beasts in the Pope’s private menagerie to no purpose. After he had studied the lithe, striped cat with the admiration and sympathy of a nature as ferocious and as dangerous, he had come to the conclusion that if the bull might serve to represent well enough the spirit and strength of that Roderigo

## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

Borgia who was now Pontiff and called Alexander, the tiger would be a far fitter emblem for his own master, Cæsar Borgia. He had thought over this symbolism a good deal, trying to express it aptly, directly, with the fittest words, for Michelotto piqued himself upon some possession of letters. He now was pleased to air his fancy upon his companion, and was perhaps a trifle disappointed to find that Griffone took the parallel very much as a matter of course and did not seem to think it necessary to compliment his superior upon his happy thought. But if Griffone neglected to applaud the simile of the tiger, he seemed well inclined to continue the conversation. Perhaps he was a little weary of the darkness and the silence and the long waiting. While the others, his fellow-bravos, remained silent and motionless as before, Griffone rubbed his hands enthusiastically as he spoke. "Cæsar is a good master. He keeps our hands red and our purses heavy."

Michelotto's truculent face was rendered nothing the more lovely by a scowl as he growled: "He should have been the old man's eldest son, instead of the fool of Gandia. Cæsar knows just what he wants in life—and gets it."

Griffone looked at Michelotto with a smile. "He wants everything," he suggested.

And Michelotto answered him, almost fiercely: "He gets everything. Oh, it is a brave thing to

## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

see and a proud thing to serve a man with such desires and such strength to win them!"

It was not for Griffone to contest the greatness and the powers of his illustrious master, so he nodded agreement and was silent for a few seconds. But now the curiosity as to the cause of his long vigil pricked him, for he had not accompanied Michelotto on this night service before. Though the black shadow of that bleak wall had been a familiar mantle to Michelotto and certain of his men for these many nights past, he had changed his companions each evening to the end that none of the many fellows under his orders should rust in excess of idleness.

"What desire brings Cæsar here in the death of the night?" Griffone asked.

There was a hint of far-off humor in Michelotto's voice as he answered, "The strangest crazy game in the world." He paused, and then added, "The love-game."

Griffone scratched his head. "What is strange in a great prince playing the love-game?" he asked.

Michelotto pricked him in the ribs with an extended forefinger, and grinned as he whispered in his ear: "Ay, but he loves not as a great prince, but as a poor student; not as Cæsar Borgia, the Pope's son, but as my Lord Lackland from nowhere."

Griffone was frankly astonished, and he showed it. "Why so, in God's name?" he questioned. It

## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

seemed to him, in the simplicity of his ruffianism, little less than incredible that a great, favored, and handsome prince should disport himself in so unnatural, so uncanny a fashion, in scorn of his golden privileges, powers, and opportunities.

Michelotto was good enough to explain his meaning to his satellite, for he was not unwilling to air his familiarity with the eccentricities of the great, and his ability, both as scholar and gentleman, to appreciate their humors, and to prove his ability to express his appreciation choicely. "He is tired of the Roman ladies that lick his feet. Cæsar can pick his passions where he pleases, like figs in an orchard, for who should say Cæsar nay? But now he has taken the whim to be loved for his naked self, just as you or I might wish to be, with none of the Borgia glory to back his wooing."

Griffone looked around him as if all the fair women in Rome were passing in slow procession before his eyes. "What she lives in Rome that does not know Cæsar Borgia?" he asked.

Michelotto slapped his palm against the blank coldness of the stone wall, and the stroke sounded loudly in the restored stillness of the place. "The shy she that hides behind this granite. A girl that only goes abroad by night, that knows no more of the color of the Roman world than a mouse; beautiful as a pagan and innocent as a saint—such is the Borgia's fancy."

## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

He spoke freely to Griffone. Cæsar's swordsmen could trust one another to regard any confidence as sacred.

Griffone chuckled. He began to think that Cæsar's fancy might have its entertaining qualities. "Where did Cæsar find such a pearl?" he asked. The description did not seem to fit any name he knew.

"I will tell you," Michelotto began, willingly enough, for he was inclined to pride himself on a gift of narrative admirable in one that had claims to be a gentleman and a scholar. Then he suddenly paused. His quick ear had caught the sound of slowly approaching footsteps. His quick eye discerned two shadows that were moving silently in the direction of the deserted place through the ruined archway. He laid his finger on his lips. "Hush! Company. To cover!" he whispered, and then Michelotto and his companions retreated deeper into the shadow of the wall, and seemed to become, as before, portions of its monumental immobility, petrified into abiding quiet, abiding silence.

Through the archway came two men, both carefully cloaked from toe to chin, perhaps for protection against the possible chilliness of the spring evening, moving slowly till they came to a halt very much on the spot where some few minutes before Messer Banda of the Bentivoglii had been bouncing his Borgia ball to the delight of his companions.

## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

One of the new-comers spoke to the other. "Is this the place?" he asked, in a smooth, tranquil voice that suggested a tranquil, well-fed man, and as he spoke he seemed to peer about him with curiosity.

His companion nodded. "Yes," he said, in a querulous, younger voice. "It is a strange nest for love-birds."

Michelotto, who had heard thus far, had no desire to hear further. These presences were importunate, disturbing him in his duty, nullifying the purpose for which he had come to that place. He advanced to them peremptorily. "Gentles," he called, "this place is private to my meditations."

He of the two strangers who had spoken first questioned Michelotto affably, and his voice, thus heard nearer, seemed to Michelotto not unfamiliar, though he could not name its owner, nor could he see its owner's face for the closely drawn hood. "Since when are the streets of Rome not free to all comers?" the stranger asked, suavely.

Michelotto met his suavity with insolence. "Since it pleased the Borgia to mark this place private," he answered, and his voice sneered and his eyes menaced.

Then the second of the strangers, who had so far remained an unconcerned or at least an unmoved witness of the incident, as if roused from his indifference by these words, advanced a little and came between Michelotto and the other man. "Not



## THE GORGEOUS BORGIA

against a Borgia!" he said, commandingly; and as he spoke he threw back the hood of his cloak and showed his face clearly in the moonlight. It was the face of a man in the spring of his youth; it was a handsome, valiant face, but stained by dissipations and fretted by strife between vehement ambitions and a shifting will. It was a face that Michelotto knew very well and loved very little, and the sight of it on that night and in that place greatly discomfited him, for it looked as if it meant that Cæsar's secret was no longer Cæsar's secret.

"Your Grace of Gandia!" he murmured, and bowed in forced respect to the Pontiff's eldest son, Francesco Borgia.

The Duke of Gandia commanded him haughtily. "Leave us, sir. I have business here as well as my brother."

Michelotto felt that he would show no wisdom in gainsaying the commands of the Duke of Gandia. However much he might suspect that the presence of Francesco Borgia in that neighborhood at that hour would prove, to say the least, unpalatable to his master, he could not venture on such slight suspicion to assume an attitude or take any action hostile to the Duke of Gandia. With a reluctant obeisance, therefore, he backed from the presence of the Pontiff's son, and retreated to his lurking-place in the farther darkness of the wall. As he ranged there, side by side with Griffone and

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his fellows, he whispered to Griffone the name of the new-comer, and added, with a malignant grip at the handle of his dagger, "If I were quite sure that the deed would please Cæsar, I would stick Messer Francesco in the ribs."

Griffone grunted approval, and Michelotto fell a-musing on the identity of Gandia's companion. He knew his voice—he was positive he knew the voice, pliant, insinuating, oily, caressing—a voice whose aim it appeared to be above all things to please and to persuade in pleasing. Michelotto strained his ears in the hope of hearing the voice again, but the new-comers had moved away out of earshot and he could catch no sound of their speech. Again he fell a-weighing the words he had heard uttered and recalling their sound. Suddenly, as he did so, the exercise provoked for him the picture of a bland, smooth man with a kind of sluggish sweetness in his creased face and small, quiet eyes that wished to beam benevolence. This face sat upon a bulky body that seemed built for sluggish ease, but that could be brisk and nimble enough when occasion demanded it. Michelotto rubbed his hands together in the darkness.

"By Apollo," he said to himself, being scholar enough to wear the affectation of swearing by the ancient gods—"by Apollo, I believe he is the Cardinal da Rovere!"

And Michelotto was right.

### III

#### "A FAIRY TALE"

WHEN Michelotto had withdrawn into the obscurity from which he had emerged, the Duke of Gandia, urged and guided by his companion, moved yet farther away from the vicinity of the wall and its warders. When they were well out of hearing the Cardinal questioned the Duke: "Why have you brought me here, my lord?"

"My Lord Cardinal," Gandia answered, with a laugh, "I have brought you here to tell you a fairy tale. My brother is in love."

Giulio da Rovere shrugged his broad shoulders. "No news to a Roman, my lord," he answered, with a good-humored smile.

Gandia was still laughing, but there was an unpleasant leaven of bitterness, almost—as it seemed to his cautious, watchful hearer—a leaven of hate, in his laughter. "No, no, no," Francesco protested. "I mean no such general love as he has for all ladies, nor such brotherly love as he bears Lucrezia"—and here he made an evil grimace—"but your true heart-of-gold, pride-of-youth, troubadour

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passion that would win a virgin's soft surrender with painted sonnets and discreet tenderness; a boy-and-girl business, Lord Cardinal, with no Borgian name whispered."

The Cardinal gaped at him. "Has he gone mad?" Gandia shook his head.

"Not a whit. We Borgias are all sane, though we all like strange things strangely. But to be a Borgia sometimes wearies, and a man would now and then be plain Giovanni or Tomaso, and ruin a maid for his own sake, like any common knave. Most great ones think so in age. Our brother has the whim betimes."

"How do you learn this?" asked the Cardinal. His mind was much alive and his thoughts brisk and busy, but there was no sign of alertness on his broad, emotionless face. He saw Gandia smile sourly in the moonlight.

"We all spy on one another. Need I tell as much to the Cardinal da Rovere? Cæsar skulks here by night and mews verses into the ears of a white child—another man's verses, for his tame poet peached a little when I found him writing sonnets for Cæsar."

"How does all this touch you?" Rovere asked. He fondled his jolly double chin and peeped mildly at Francesco Borgia.

Gandia paused for a moment, and then continued his explanation:

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"A little, even much. Cæsar is my rival with a certain nameless lady whom I love; he pesters her with his affections, will not leave her in peace. I should like to fret him in turn, to spoil his sport for him. Now, I have cause to believe that the woman who lives so quietly in this grim island of a house is a child of one of the dead Orsini that we hated so and that hated us so. If I tell the girl who her wooer is, it is ten devils to a straight saint but I spoil the wooing. That is why I have walked this way to-night, Eminence."

Rovere seemed to muse for a while upon the problems presented to him by the speech of Gandia. If he reflected that when the young Duke came to him that evening and entreated his company for a quiet walk and talk by Tiber-side he had not expected the aim of the promenade and the conversation to prove so trivial, he showed nothing of his thought on his persistently placid countenance. But it seemed to him, musing busily behind his mask of imperturbability, that Francesco Borgia was hot to force a quarrel over-precipitously and with little prospect of advantage to the provoker.

Presently he said, thoughtfully: "His Holiness, your illustrious father, has been known to say of Cæsar, your illustrious brother, that he is in the main a good fellow, but that his great blemish is that he will never forget an affront. My advice to you is, let the Borgia alone."

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Gandia's pale face was distorted with a sudden anger. He almost screamed his answer to the Cardinal's counsel.

"The Borgia! The Borgia! Why do you call him the Borgia? Am not I a Borgia, too, and the elder shoot? Why should Gandia fear Cæsar? Besides, my brother is not Cain, nor I quite the lamb-like Abel."

The spurting, angry passion of the Duke kindled no show of emotion in Rovere. "My lord," he said, quietly, "if I made so bold as to counsel you not to provoke your brother rashly or unreasonably, it was only out of the zeal of my heart for your interests, and a fear, that may well be exaggerated, of your dangers. I am, as you know, and as all men know, no politician, no man of the world, but, if I play no part in the great game that others are so hot over, I still am, in my little way, a reader of books, and so, in a lesser way, a reader of men. Now, it has occurred to me that if I were a chronicler of these present times, I should note the existence of two brothers, sons of a high, mighty, and illustrious Pontiff, and both equally beloved and honored by their parent. Of these two sons, the one that is the oldest becomes, by virtue of his primogeniture, a soldier and great captain, the standard-bearer of the Church, the man to defend everywhere by arms the interests of Rome, and to carry everywhere the imperial eagles of Rome to

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victory. Now, the other son, by the, to him, misfortune of his later birth, is destined to enter more immediately into the service of the Church; to be, what I am proud to be, one of her enrolled adherents; to wear, as I am proud to wear, the crimson of the cardinal. But, unfortunately, it turns out, if I am right in my reading of the man, and indeed I only hazard a guess at all adventure, that your father's second son, your younger brother, is not as glad as I am of the duties thrust upon him. I should be tempted to believe that he yearns rather for the sword than for the crozier, that he would sooner hear the brawl of a battle than the murmur of a mass, and that he burns with a red jealousy of that elder brother who shines abroad in golden armor, like Michael the Archangel, and takes precedence at great ceremonies of so many princes, while he must be content to huddle, an obscure unit, in the ruck of cardinals. Now, if this man be as I think him, here is the argument I would have you duly ponder. How great an advantage it would be to him if some ill-chance overtook his elder brother! Why, then, in a twinkling, he becomes first man in Rome, first son of his father; he can slip his scarlet cardinal's coat, become a layman again, and the great captain that he yearns to be. I say all this with no thought of putting unworthy suspicions into your mind or stirring the embers of discord between two noble brothers, but merely

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to advise you to act with wise thinking and not without wise thinking."

Gandia had listened with some show of impatience to the involved and cautious reasoning of his companion. "Eminence," he cried, "I think you mean well by me! I think you are of my side!"

Rovere looked at him gravely. "My heart is with you," he said; "my hand is with you; my thoughts are your thoughts in this matter. Your illustrious brother Cæsar has, I think, the ambition to be for Italy what his namesake was for all the world. Such an ambition troubles me little. I am a patient man, content to sit at home and turn my thumbs while other folk play out the tragedy; but if I were ambitious, as you are, if I were fiery-blooded, as you are, I should think there was not elbow-room enough in the world for him and for me on this side of the Styx, and that I must choose to strike or be stricken."

He spoke as he always spoke, very smoothly and slowly and deliberately, and in such a fashion that even when his words, taken in themselves, were most pregnant of suggestion, the manner of their utterance was carefully calculated to make them seem no more than the vaguest speculation. But they were cunningly timed and cunningly plied, and Gandia caught at his words.

"Then I will strike!" he cried. "I am weary of



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this swaggering brother, who envies me my eldership and steals sweet things from me."

He paused as if he feared he had gone too far, and looked anxiously at Rovere's impassive face. "I believe you are honest," he affirmed.

"I am honest," Rovere answered, frankly, with a frankness that was quite unlike his thoughts. "If I could have my way I should like to be on good terms with everybody. Every coin has two sides to it, and if ivory is white and priceless, black ebony has its value, too. Oh yes, I am honest."

Gandia, seeming reassured, beckoned him a little nearer and whispered to him: "I am making a league among the great lords who hate my brother. I am gathering all the golden names of Rome into my net; but, for further surety, I am treating with the exiled Orsini. Perhaps I may bring them home again; perhaps they will help me to get Cæsar out of the way."

Rovere listened with no show of interest on his affable, impassive face, and for a moment there was silence, the two men looking steadfastly at each other in the moonlight. Then Gandia drew from his bosom a folded paper and handed it to Rovere, who took it. "What is this?" he asked, as he unfolded it slowly.

"It is a list," Gandia answered, "of the notables of Rome. I have set a scarlet cross against the names of those that are inclined to me."

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Rovere ran his glance down the list, muttering comments as he did so. "So my nephew's name is among your partisans? He is a fool to be so forward. Banda, too. Banda is no great gain."

"Banda has wealth," Gandia urged.

Rovere smiled a little. "True, he has wealth, but he will spend it on no one but himself. What's this?" he asked, his slight smile changing to a decided frown. "Here is my name written free at the end of your paper."

Gandia came nearer to him. "Let me set," he entreated, "a scarlet cross against it, to show that I have the best man in Rome for my friend."

For answer Rovere deliberately tore off the end of the paper which contained his name, and thrust the torn-off piece into his breast. Then he gravely handed back the paper to Gandia.

"Leave out my name," he said. "I will serve you if I can, but it must be in my own way—quietly."

Gandia thrust the paper into his bosom. "As you please," he said, sullenly, and for a few seconds the two men stood facing each other in silence. Then the silence was broken by a not unmusical voice that came from the top of one of the twisted stairways that passed for streets—a voice that was singing a little Italian song of the common people, a little song that was loudly and lewdly in praise of women, and that began thus:

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"O ladies dark, O ladies fair,  
Love lies at ambush in your hair;  
O ladies plump, O ladies slim,  
I only live to please your whim."

The song died away, and was renewed again as the singer wound his slow way down the spiral of the steep street. It grew plainer as it came nearer, though it was still some way off.

Gandia knew the voice well enough, and so did Rovere, for he caught at Gandia's mantle. "It is your brother. Come with me," he urged.

Gandia shook him off. "Nay, I await him."

Rovere said, promptly, "Then I bid you farewell."

"Are you afraid of Cæsar?" Gandia asked, scornfully.

Rovere nodded his head energetically, in no wise affected by Gandia's scorn. "Certainly," he said. "I fear Cæsar as I fear earthquake or pestilence or any of the visitations of God that man's hands are not strong enough to grapple with. Be advised and come with me."

Gandia shook his head.

Rovere continued to urge him with a vehemence that seemed feverishly impatient in one so wontedly placid. "Cæsar, once, in the bull-ring, killed in succession six of the most dangerous bulls that could be found, and when he had slain them all,

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to show still the untired strength of his arm, he lopped off the last bull's head. That is Cæsar's way in everything. Be advised, and come with me."

It may well be that Rovere, even while he thus pleaded, was, like the pious Æneas, with whose adventures he prided himself on being intimately familiar, revolving many cares in his mind. It was quite clear to him that he could gain no advantage by being present at a meeting between two hostile brothers, one of whom had come to the place of meeting with the deliberate intention of thwarting and flouting the other. It was quite clear, also, that if he remained and a quarrel came of it, his presence would be of no advantage to Gandia, seeing that adherents of Cæsar were so near at hand. It was further very clear that it would be wholly to his advantage to be ignorant of what sparks might fly from the clash between the two men. Further, and finally, it was not at all clear to him that Francesco Borgia was the right man to form a plot or lead a party against Cæsar Borgia. All things duly considered, it were best and pleasantest to him, Giulio da Rovere, to be out of the way. He would urge Francesco to accompany him, and he did so urge Francesco; but if Francesco were not to be persuaded, he would go alone.

So, as Gandia still shook his head, and the Car-

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dinal could read on the stubborn, angry face a resolution not to be changed, Rovere swiftly wished him good-night and disappeared through the archway. It was plain that Cardinal Rovere wished to be on good terms with everybody.

## IV

### “A DAUGHTER OF THE ORSINI”

THE man who had been singing the song was now coming briskly down the last precipitous steps of the dark stairway. He caught sight of the solitary figure standing in the moonlight, and, pausing in his descent, called out, “Is that you, Michelotto?”

Gandia cried back, “It is I, Cæsar.”

By this time Cæsar had come to the end of the steps, and immediately he advanced to where his brother awaited him. The pair stood face to face for some silent seconds, and Michelotto, eying them from afar, and seeing them both plainly enough, could take note for the hundredth time or so of the curious contrast between the two brothers. Cæsar was handsomer and stronger than his elder brother, more nobly proportioned, more firmly knit, and, albeit he was reported to be even more licentious and depraved than the Duke of Gandia, neither license nor debauch seemed to have withered the freshness of his mind, clouded the brightness of his eyes, or dimmed the clear color in his cheeks.

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Though he was believed to be ambitious, ambition had not fretted the cheerful serenity of his comeliness, and there was no sign on the fine forehead or about the firm lips of any weakness of will such as degraded the grace of Gandia's countenance.

Cæsar spoke blithely, and as serenely as if he were truly pleased to greet his brother.

"Francesco! Why do you drift here in the thick of the night?"

Gandia retorted, in a voice that trembled a little from the strength of his anger at the sight of Cæsar, "Why are you here?"

Cæsar answered agreeably, as one that humors an importunate kinsman: "For my pleasure, brother; for my pleasure. I am sometimes of an owlish humor and like to fly by night."

A sour smile twisted Francesco's features unpleasantly. "Your owl is a bird of prey and feeds on mice and suchlike. Is there a mouse behind yonder curtain?"

As he spoke he pointed to the great wall that loomed in front of them, a black mass of shadow.

Cæsar shook a finger at him as if in playful reproof, and his voice was as playful as his gesture.

"Brother of Gandia, have you been playing peep-bo?" he questioned, brightly.

Gandia's sour smile changed to a sullen frown. "Cæsar, you have spoiled sport for me; you know best where. Sancia and Lucrezia were sweet names

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to me till you tried to make them bitter. How if I had a mind to spoil your sport in this quarter?"

Cæsar looked at him composedly, with an air of unchangeable good-humor. "I should advise you to change your mind," he said, placidly.

Gandia came a little nearer to Cæsar and grinned at him maliciously. "You do not know who the girl is. Neither, for that matter, does she. But I know who she is; she is a daughter of the Orsini."

If Cæsar was surprised now, he showed no surprise. "Are you sure?" he said, quietly, still airing his imperturbable smile.

Triumph gleamed in Gandia's angry eyes. "Very sure. The which timely knowledge gives me a trick, as I think if I do so much as to tell her the true name of her wooer she will trip no more to your whistle."

"But you will not do this," Cæsar said, as calmly, as blandly as before.

Cæsar's calmness, Cæsar's blandness seemed to have a peculiarly irritating effect upon his brother, for he gripped his fingers into his palms and answered, angrily: "I will, and instantly. I am the friend of virtue, Cæsar; I will not have maidenhood misled."

Cæsar looked at him with the slightest possible tightening of the lips for a moment. Then he spoke warningly, though still with his persistent smoothness. "You were wise to be wiser."



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Gandia was not in the mood to take a warning. "I will beat at the door!" he cried, and turned to go toward the wall, but as he did so Cæsar caught him by the arm and stayed him, saying, sharply:

"You play the fool too fully."

At the touch of Cæsar's restraining hand, at the sound of Cæsar's altered voice, Gandia suddenly turned upon him, showing his teeth like an angry animal. "You play the knave too squarely," he screamed, and struck Cæsar fiercely on the breast.

With the blow Cæsar's urbanity, Cæsar's self-restraint seemed to vanish, as a dream vanishes at a noise. "Damn you, ass!" he cried, and Michelotto, watching from his corner, saw an ugly sight before he had time to think of interfering. The two men closed in a scuffle, each clawing each with one hand, each drawing his dagger with the other. There was a moment of wild, trampling rage, of swaying bodies, of choking breaths; then, before Michelotto could decide to interfere or hold aloof, Cæsar stabbed Gandia once and twice, and Gandia fell heavily to the ground. Michelotto, as he now ran hotly forward, saw the Duke rise on one elbow, saw him glare up at Cæsar, heard him gasp out some miserable words: "God's curse on you, Cain. May the girl help you to hell."

Then he dropped again, and lay a motionless heap upon the cobbles that were now running with his blood.

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Michelotto was close at hand by this time, and Cæsar heard him and saw him. "Michelotto!" he called, in a cool, even voice, and the bravo, with his companions at his heels, came to his master's side. Cæsar, with an air of great unconcern, wiped his wet weapon on the cloak of one of the bravos that stood nearest to him, and returned it to its house at his girdle. Then he pointed to the body lying lifeless at his feet.

"Take him and throw him into the Tiber," he ordered, in cool, indifferent tones. The magnitude of the act, whether as crime or as stroke of policy, did not seem in the least to affect him. However, as the bravos were about to obey his command, he stopped them. "Wait," he said; "he may have something upon him worth looking for." He bent down and fumbled unceremoniously at the dead man's doublet. After a moment or two he uttered a little exclamation of satisfaction; then he rose with a paper in his hand, which he opened and glanced at. The moonlight was sufficiently bright to let him see that it contained a list of names, the names of many of the chief nobles in Rome, and that against some of the names a little cross in scarlet ink had been set. He folded the paper again, thrust it into his bosom, and pointed to the body.

"To the river with him," he said again, as composedly as before, and the bravos took up Gandia's corpse and carried it out through the archway

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toward Tiber, leaving their master alone with Michelotto.

No sign of compunction or of concern for what had just passed showed itself on Cæsar's face as he placed a hand on Michelotto's shoulder, for it was his way to be familiar with his favorite bravo. "This will vex our father," he said, calmly; "but it was not to be helped, and it clears my way to empire. Let us talk no more about it." He made as if he were about to speak further, but Michelotto, seemingly more impressed by the gravity of what had happened than his master, ventured to interrupt him.

"My lord," he said, "when he"—and Michelotto jerked his thumb in the direction of the archway to illustrate his meaning—"came here just now he was not alone. There was a man with him whose face I could not see, but from his voice I believe him to be the Cardinal Rovere."

Cæsar laughed lightly at Michelotto's tidings, which did not seem to fidget him one whit.

"Was red reynard here? What became of him?"

"He left before your highness appeared," Michelotto answered. "It may be that he left because he heard your highness coming."

"Perhaps it was as well for him that he did," Cæsar said, more thoughtfully than before; but he soon tuned his voice again to levity. "Now for my love-making," he cried, gayly. "I have learned

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something to-night, Michelotto." As he spoke he seated himself comfortably upon a fallen column of the ancient temple, as one that is inclined to sit and chat.

"What, my lord?" Michelotto asked.

Cæsar looked at him humorously. "You wonder why I come to this dark place night after night?"

Michelotto protested with outstretched hands: "It is enough for me that such is your pleasure, so long as I and my fellows are at hand for your safety."

So he spoke, knowing very well the while that Cæsar came on that love-game of which he had spoken to Griffone. But if Cæsar was pleased to offer information, it was his duty to appear ignorant, and, after all, he only knew that a young and lovely girl lived there alone whom Cæsar now for many nights had visited in a plain habit. He had marvelled at Cæsar's unfamiliar constancy; perhaps he was presently to be enlightened.

Cæsar gave a sigh of satisfaction and blew a kiss toward the black wall. "In this gloomy region I have found the fountain of youth, and while I sip its sweet water I am renewed in spirit, and every sated sense recovers the freshness of the dawn."

"Your lordship is fortunate," Michelotto commented, dryly.

Cæsar was evidently in a mood for narrative. "A fortnight ago I was wooing a lady whose hus-

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band made an ill-timed return. I stabbed him into silence, and then, losing taste for the game, left the lady in a faint and resolved to walk home."

Michelotto, alarmed out of decorum, interrupted his lord. "Alone?" he cried. "That was rash."

Cæsar only laughed at his agitation. "I wore my shirt of mail, and, as I carried sword and dagger, I should have been sorry for any robbers that ventured to cross me. But none such showed a nose, and I drifted idly and in peace. I was in a vagrant mood, full of philosophy. My feet carried me unconscious hither. A girl passed me and entered yonder chapel. I saw her face."

Cæsar paused as one who broods over delightful memories. Michelotto was interested, and the delay in the tale fretted him. He presumed upon his familiarity with Cæsar. "Well, my lord?" he prompted.

Cæsar shook himself free of his sweet broodings and continued his narrative. "I know not if my fancy had been a little overwrought by the night's bloody, loveless business, or if my balked desires made me imaginative, but that face seemed to me the fairest I had ever seen or ever dreamed of. For in dreams you know one sometimes sees women fairer than we ever see on earth, women as fair as ancient statues. I followed the girl into the chapel. I knelt hard by her in prayer and thought what I should do to win her, for all the world like

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a love-sick lad in the first raw greenness of his spring."

"Why did you not have her carried to the palace?" Michelotto asked. Michelotto made it a habit to take a practical view of all love-affairs, his or another's.

Cæsar smiled wisely. "It was my first thought," he admitted. "My second thought was better. I wished to taste a rarer flavor, play a fairer game. I would be the nameless lover, would woo and win for my own hand like the first Jack at hazard. So, as night followed night, I played my shepherd pastoral. I shared in her prayers; then it was a touch of her hand at the benictory, both our fingertips wet with the holy dew; from that to a modest word of salutation at the porch was an easy passage; and so by degrees I sighed my way through the blessed calendar of love to a welcome lodging in her ermine's heart. She takes me for a poor, down-at-heel student, as poor as a church-mouse. I took her for a girl of humble station, one of those wonder flowers that sometimes spring from common stock, but to-night I am wiser. What do you think is her quality?"

"What, my lord?" Michelotto questioned, with no great alertness, believing he knew all there was to know. Now, as was natural, when Michelotto was made aware of Cæsar's nightly visits to the silent house in the sordid quarter of the town, he,

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as became an intelligent bravo, pushed his inquiries. In the result he learned nothing to arouse his suspicions. The house had at one time belonged to a decayed noble family now extinct. From their hands it had passed into the possession of an apparently well-to-do merchant in the Turkey trade, whose business kept him for the most part away from Rome. In the house lived a young girl attended upon by a few elderly and very respectable servants; and this young girl, who seldom went abroad, and then mostly by night, was believed by some of the neighbors to be the young wife, by more to be the young mistress, and by a few to be the young daughter of the merchant. In any case, as she was reported very comely, and as the merchant was incessantly abroad, there was nothing surprising or dubious about his keeping the young woman close. Jealous husband, jealous lover, or zealous father would naturally do as much. So Michelotto witnessed the continuance of Cæsar's intrigue with a light heart.

"Why," said Cæsar, "this girl I favor, this girl I swain like a shepherd from Arcady, is a daughter of the Orsini."

Michelotto brought his hands quickly together. "Heard in good time. Here is a trap for you, my lord, baited with this virginity. Shall I seize the girl?"

Cæsar laughed at Michelotto's alarm and chast-

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ened Michelotto's hasty purposes. "Nonsense, man, nonsense," he protested. "The girl has no idea who I am; the girl is very fervidly in love with her lowly wooer. I would not stop the sport for my father's jewels. The rareness of the adventure delights me. I nibble luxuriously at this unstained morsel."

"If I may advise you—" Michelotto began, but Cæsar promptly stopped him.

"You may not, Michelotto. You have a good stabbing hand—though I think I have shown that I am not unready in your trade—but for a thinking head my own pumpkin serves my purpose." As he spoke a distant church-bell beat the hour. Cæsar rose from the fallen column that had served him for a seat. "My time of tryst," he said. "I hope to win the girl to my will to-night. I can play the patient game no longer, and I think she will prove pliant. But if not, I may follow your counsel and carry her off like a new Sabine woman. Keep well within call, and let no one approach."

Michelotto bowed his head. "I obey, my lord."

By this time the bravos had returned from the Tiber, having despatched their task, and were standing together patiently under the ancient archway. Michelotto went over to them.

Cæsar advanced into the shadow of the wall and pursued his course along it till he came to a small door. Here he paused and began to sing in his pleasant, fresh voice another song, not a broad and



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popular ballad this time, but a brace of verses that Messer Agapito da Amalia, his secretary, had made for him:

“Beautiful bird in the garden of love,  
There’s a hawk on the wing.  
I am the tercel and you are the dove—  
Poor little thing!

“Glorious rose of the garden of joy,  
There’s a thief in the bower.  
I am the spoiler and you are the toy—  
Poor little flower!”

When he had done singing he beat against the door three times with his open hand and waited. In a few moments he heard a sound as of a bolt being drawn back, a sound that was immediately repeated. Cæsar pushed against the door, which opened easily, and passed through it into the leafy glooms beyond.

## V

### “THE WONDER OF WONDERS”

THE great wall must often have seemed to those that passed under its shadow as forbidding as the frowning portals which Dante saw in his vision and as hopeless. Yet on the other side of it, like a precious diamond treasured in an iron box, bloomed in its shelter a beautiful garden that a poet might well have called an earthly paradise. Encompassed by the high masonry on every side, and safely shut away from all curiosity, it flourished as green and bright as if its place lay in the open country and not on the skirts of a crowded city. In this delicious kingdom there were alleys and terraces and fountains and innumerable flowers, and groves of trees so thickly planted that from the far end of the garden it was not possible to behold the house to which the garden belonged.

In the remotest part of this garden on this night of spring a young girl sat on a marble seat by a fountain and seemed to read in a book. She seemed to read, but her thoughts were often far from the written page, and this though the book held sonnets

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that sang of love, for the girl's thoughts were more of the lover than of the love which the rhymes recorded. The book was a little volume in which her sweetheart had written certain songs and sonnets for her that professed to be the outpourings of his own passionate heart, but that were in fact provided for him by Messer Agapito, either out of his own flowery fancy or from copies of the utterances of courtly poets. She murmured to herself the words of the sonnet that lay on the open page before her; it was the work of the youthful Pietro Bembo, but the girl did not know that, and was content to believe it addressed to her and to find it very beautiful.

“Hair of crisp gold, and amber fine and pure,  
By the light breeze o'er snow-white shoulders spun;  
Eyes very kind and brighter than the sun,  
Making noonday of darkness most obscure;  
A smile that can all sullen thoughts conjure  
With pearls and rubies from which murmurs run  
So sweet that sweeter love could wish for none.  
An ivory hand that can the heart allure;  
A voice that tunes to the divinest chords;  
Ripe wisdom in the very prime of youth;  
Such loveliness as never yet I knew;  
The highest beauty bound to highest truth;  
These were to me love's torches, these to you  
The gifts that Heaven to very few accords.”

She let the book fall into her lap and sat pensive. She seemed to be waiting, she seemed to be hoping.

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All the lines of her body, all the expression of her face told of one that lingered expectant and eager. And while she waited, while she hoped, she thought. Her mind fed itself upon those few, those beautiful hours that had so transformed her life from its former strange, wistful, and peaceable monotony. She was loved, and by such a lover, a lover so gentle, so tender, so fair to look upon, so delightful to listen to. She strove to retrace in her memory the stages of the strange wooing, the delicate advances of the unknown youth, the growth of intimacy so swift between predestined lovers, the rapture of the discovery not merely that she was beloved, but that she loved in return.

Who, she asked herself, could resist the advances of that sun-hearted, sun-eyed student whose only wealth, indeed, lay in his words, but whose words were more wonderful than all the gold, all the jewels of a king's treasury. Of herself she knew so little that she had seldom questioned the future. She had taken it for granted, not indeed tamely, but patiently, that there was a world outside, a world of which all she knew was given in her daily visits to the close-neighboring church, that green and high-walled garden, a world with other citizens than her grave and silent servitors. But she had scarcely ventured to speculate as to what the future might have to give her from its dubious wares. She was still young enough to be content with youth and life,

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and into the gracious greenness of such an existence there suddenly came this golden apparition, this bright-eyed, quick-witted, nimble-tongued creature, who, if he were only a poor student, seemed to her to be measurelessly rich in his living wit, in his high spirits, in his exquisite mastery of the art of wooing a woman.

It would all have to be told by-and-by to her mysterious warden, but in the mean time there was no one to tell it to; in the mean time there was nothing to do but to be happy, and she was intensely happy. It seemed to her as if Heaven in its blessed providence had taken pity upon her loneliness and given her for companion now and mate hereafter the noblest and the comeliest of imaginable men; and if, because of her ignorance, she had no fear of her lover, her innocence had found nothing to fear in any word or deed of his. All their love-making had been highly tuned like a lute, finely woven like some delicate gold web cunningly spun from sunbeams and moonbeams and starbeams. It was all like something in a dream; it was all like something in a fairy tale, so exquisitely beautiful that it scarcely seemed possible that it was also true; and yet it was true, and it was as true as it was beautiful.

She had deemed herself happy before in her gray-green seclusion, but she knew now that she had not then the least understanding of what happiness

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might be. Now she knew, or she fancied she knew, the very top of joy. There could be no greater happiness; the hope as the belief was that this happiness might endure forever. So she thought, musing at once expectant and languid, eager and still, the only sound in her ears the soft plashing of the fountain, the soft wailing of the wind among the leaves, the soft mourning of the nightingales.

Presently she stiffened into a more fixed attitude of attention and her eyes brightened, for her ears seemed to catch the faint sound of a song, and then when the song was silenced there came three blows as of an open palm upon the door in the wall behind the yew-tree hedge. Quickly the girl leaped to her feet, leaving her book upon the seat, and, running across the little strip of lawn that divided her from the yew-tree hedge, passed through the screen of darkling trees and paused before the strongly barred door in the wall. Quickly, as one familiar with the deed, she drew the easily yielding bolts that secured the door, and, this accomplished, she did not wait for the door to open, but quickly ran back and sat in her old place, with her hands locked, her lips parted, and her bosom heaving with expectation.

She had not long to wait. Almost immediately Cæsar Borgia emerged from the shadow of the yews and hastened toward her. She turned instantly to greet him with a cry of joy, and in another moment she was girdled in his arms.

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"Alexander!" she cried.

And Cæsar kissed her. "Are you glad to see me, Lavinella?" he asked, eagerly.

The girl smiled fondly at him and answered him with the gracious playfulness of love. "The sunflower is not so glad to greet the sun, the rose is not so glad to greet the nightingale. Think of what other delicate comparisons you please, my scholar, my poet, and I promise you my affection shall better it."

Cæsar looked at her passionately, clasping her close. "I will not tell you how glad I am to see you, for you can read it for yourself in the light of my eyes, in the hold of my hands, in the fall of my kisses."

Even as he spoke he kissed her so insistently that Lavinella repelled him tenderly. "Gently, my Alexander," she pleaded, "gently, or you will kiss me out of existence." Then, as if regretful for even so delicate a check, she added, "Oh, Alexander, is it not the wonder of wonders and the joy of joys that we two are here and so happy who never saw each other when that moon was a sickle?"

She pointed as she spoke to where the great moon now swam in the heavens, a wheel of glory.

Cæsar echoed her words. "The wonder of wonders and the joy of joys." Then he added, thoughtfully, with a tantalizing note in his voice, "And yet, after all, how little do we know of each other!"

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Lavinella laughed gladly, as one that was not to be scared by such shadows. "We know all that we need to know when we know that we love."

"There is the truth of God," Cæsar cried, delighted with the warm candor of her innocence, and he kissed her again.

When for a time he had made an end of kissing, Lavinella sighed. "I think," she said, "I should be well content to die on such a kiss on such a night. What noble obsequies I should boast! Why, I would lie here in state in this green garden, and there should be a garland of flowers about my head, cunningly woven of cryptic blossoms, to tell the wise that here lay a young girl killed by her very happiness. The moonlight should be my shroud. Those nightingales should be my mourners, the glow-worms my torch-bearers, and the breath of the summer wind among the trees should serve as my requiem."

Cæsar held both her hands and looked into her eager, smiling face. "Divine child," he asked, "how can a poor scholar such as I hope to win such a wonder as you?"

"I am no wonder," Lavinella murmured, softly. "All maids would love as I do if they had such a man to love."

"And all men would love as I do if they had such a maid to love," Cæsar answered.

Lavinella looked at him in a playful chiding.



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"How, then, could you say we do not know each other?" she asked, and her voice was triumphant.

For the first few moments after Cæsar's arrival the lovers had stood together on the lawn. But they were sitting now, side by side, on the marble bench. Cæsar caught the girl's hand and kissed it in a rapture that was for the instant very real.

"Exquisite creature! Well, as for me, I am a simple fellow. There is no mystery about me; I am but a poor student that hopes some day to gain a great man's favor with a book of songs." He paused for a moment and then questioned, looking steadily at her, "But you, sweetheart—is there not something odd and unnatural in this shrouded life of yours?"

Lavinella looked all round her at the green darkness dappled with moonlight and thought her little kingdom very beautiful. "I have never found it so," she answered, slowly, as if she wondered a little at his words, "for I have known no other life since I was a little child and lived far away in the hills. This garden is my kingdom, my old nurse Gianetta is my guardian angel, and old Jacopo, her husband, is my standing army."

"And do you never weary of this peace?" Cæsar asked, softly. It was very clear to him that the girl was all honesty, all simplicity, hiding nothing.

Lavinella looked at him candidly. "I thought it the best thing in the world," she said, gravely, "till

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I saw your eyes and learned wiser wisdom. If the life be quiet, I am neither lonely nor idle. For I practise the comely tongues of the Old World, and I read much in fair books, and I am diligent in music and the dance. I have masters in these arts that visit me every morning."

Cæsar looked admiration. "You are a wonderful pearl to find in so dark a corner. Can I wear such a jewel in my poor bonnet?"

Lavinella laughed again. "You are a scholar, Alexander, and would find my womanish gear a very meagre equipment. But it is more to the tune of our happiness that you are my lover and I am yours." She paused for a moment and then went on again: "I believe, Alexander, that Heaven has linked our two fortunes together. I dreamed the other night that I was sitting at my open window looking over Rome. It was night; there was no moon, and there were only two stars, one that seemed to burn with a bright flame, golden red, and the other that shone with a pale silver fire. And these two stars rose slowly together through the darkness side by side, and as they rose it seemed to me that a voice cried to me from the void and told me that these two stars were our planets, yours and mine, and that your fate and mine were forever bound together. And then, as I watched those stars climbing higher and higher up the stairs of Heaven, I suddenly awoke and found

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myself lying in my little bed and the gray dawn was coming in at the window."

Cæsar smiled at her fancy and at her earnestness, yet he was superstitious, too, and this talk of the stars touched him. He believed that he had a star, but it seemed somehow incongruous to his dignity that any woman could keep pace with or be of need to his fortunes. Yet this woman was of the Orsini. The humor of the situation appealed to him.

For a little while the lovers sat silent, watching the quivering shadows of the leaves upon the grass. Then Cæsar asked her, suddenly, "Would you leave your little kingdom for me?"

Lavinella knitted her brows for an instant, as if the suddenness of the question had caught her unawares. Then she answered, "Gladly, if my warden be willing."

Cæsar questioned again. "And if your warden be not willing?"

Lavinella gave a little sigh and killed it instantly with a little smile. "Then less blithely, for I cherish my warden dearly, but I would go with you all the same, for you are the lord of my heart, and your people shall be my people and your God my God."

"Who is this warden of yours?" Cæsar asked.

Lavinella shook her head. "Indeed, I cannot tell you; indeed, I truly know him but little and see him but seldom. He is a busy merchant, and

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comes and goes, this way and that, through Italy, trafficking in his wares; but he never tells me of his travels. He comes here only at night, and I never have warning of his coming."

Cæsar eyed her curiously. "He is only your warden? He has never played the lover with you?"

Lavinella smiled denial. "Oh no, no! I think he has too iron-hearted a body for love to trouble him with its sweet pain. He treats me, if not as a daughter—for I am sure he is not my father—at least as an adopted child."

Cæsar studied her face for a moment, nursing his chin in his hand. Was it true, he asked himself, that this beautiful, secluded creature was really of the Orsini? Then he asked, abruptly, "Does he ever speak to you of Cæsar Borgia?"

"Seldom," Lavinella answered.

"And then—?" Cæsar persisted.

Lavinella gave a shudder. "As men speak of the evil one."

Cæsar laughed a laugh of cordial approval. "Naturally."

Again they were silent for a little space; both were thinking of Cæsar Borgia, but one with more knowledge than the other. Presently Lavinella leaned forward and touched her companion lightly on the hand. "Tell me, you who live in the bustle and commerce of the world—tell me your private thought of this Borgia."

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Cæsar answered with an inscrutable smile. "I think he is a very masterful prince."

"Do you love him or hate him?" Lavinella persisted.

Cæsar made a wry face. "I ought not to love him, for he killed my brother."

Lavinella gave a cry of horror. "Have you not revenged him?" she asked, with a quick fierceness that seemed to Cæsar's eyes very notably to betray the Orsini strain.

Cæsar smiled apologetically and spread out his hands. "How should so slight a fellow as I strike at Cæsar Borgia?"

Lavinella clasped her hands together tightly and her face was set and stern. "If I were hurt in my kin or my honor, or the honor of my house, I would find a way."

Cæsar looked at her as a man might look at a beautiful statue.

"You would make a very beautiful Judith," he said, approvingly. "If I were a sculptor I would show you so, the pale incarnation of revenge watching the dragon-blood of tyranny drip from the crooked blade." He watched her for a few moments admiringly, then changed his note. "But why do we think of vengeance when our thoughts should be wholly of love?"

Lavinella smiled back at him. "I am the happiest girl in the world to have such a lover,"

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she declared, and seemed radiant in the declaration.

Cæsar caught her in his arms and held her very close to him. "Then yield your sweet self to me," he whispered, and pelted her with kisses.

Lavinella strove to glide from his embrace. "That were neither honest nor modest," she protested, "and I am both. You would not have me otherwise."

Cæsar wooed her with his eyes. "I would not have you otherwise," he vowed; "and yet when I hold you thus in my arms, when I kiss you thus on the mouth, my senses struggle so with my virtues that I know not how to control them. Give love his liberty."

Lavinella pushed at him weakly with protesting palms. "Alexander!" she cried, "I fear you because I fear myself. Where I give my heart I give my soul forever. Neither time nor tears nor hope of heaven nor the dread of hell can change me when once I have given myself to my lover, even though my lover should prove worse than the graceless thief."

Cæsar kissed her on the mouth. "I would have you so," he cried.

Lavinella still repulsed him. "The gods have given me some gift of hatred," she said, "but a greater gift of love."

"That is well," cried Cæsar. "I woo your love and not your hate, and wish to win your love."

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He kissed her again and again. Lavinella murmured faintly the name of her lover—"Alexander." Cæsar wooed her hotly.

"The golden hours of love run by us with winged feet, while the gray hours of life limp sadly. Can you not trust me, my lover? If you are gracious to my pain to-night, do you think I shall be found faithless to-morrow? Love has given us to each other; let us not deny love."

Again Lavinella murmured his name more faintly than before—"Alexander."

Cæsar urged her fervidly. "In this dear garden, under the divine auspices of the moon, with the summer-mad nightingales for our choristers, let our nuptials be honored."

Lavinella tried to escape from his clinging arms. "Let me go, Alexander," she entreated, piteously.

But Cæsar cried, triumphantly, "Nay, not now." Yet even as he seemed to be triumphing over a resistance that grew fainter and vainer, even in that moment victory vanished and his heart withered, for a voice was heard in the distance calling, "Lavinella!"

## VI

“WHAT HAVE I TO DO?”

THE lovers started apart at the sound. “What was that?” Cæsar asked, in a voice that was hoarse with arrested passion and with the rekindled thought of possible treason, of the baited snare that Michelotto had feared.

Lavinella, who had glided from his loosened clasp at the call, turned to him a face that was a little troubled but that wore a reassuring smile. “My warden has returned,” she said, quietly, but she panted and her bosom heaved and her eyes were moist and languid.

Cæsar’s face had suddenly grown fierce and evil and his hand was gripped upon the handle of his dagger. It was true enough what his father said of him, that he was ill to cross in his humors, and to be thus balked at the moment when he had decided that the time for triumph had arrived filled his veins with flame. “In an ill hour,” he whispered, and there was murder in his words; but Lavinella’s soft clasp fell upon his clinched fingers and restrained him, and the dagger stayed in its house.



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"Alexander," she pleaded, "you would not harm the old man. He will not keep me long; he never does. Come again by-and-by and we will talk more wisely.

Cæsar stooped and kissed her hand. He had recovered his self-control now with a violent effort, and was once again the dutiful lover, all devotion, all discretion, all respect. "I will come again by-and-by," he said, softly, "and we will talk more fondly."

He kissed her and rose and passed into the shadow of the yew-trees and out by the door. His bearing was mild but his heart was wild fire, and he promised himself that when by-and-by should be now he would burn up the girl's innocence as Jupiter consumed Semele. After he had disappeared the girl paused for a moment as if in doubt. Then she ran swiftly in his track and softly pushed the bolts of the door home into their sockets. Running back through the yew-trees, she returned to the marble seat and sat there as if sleeping, with her extended right hand resting lightly upon the book.

All this had happened very quickly, in a swift race of seconds. Now there came the sound of footsteps hurrying along the alley that led to the house, and in a few moments more a man appeared upon the lawn. The new-comer was a man of more than middle-age, simply and soberly clad after the fashion of a merchant or trader in a hum-

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ble way of life, but the face revealed by the moonlight was rather the face of a statesman and soldier than of a man of petty business. The bronzed, stern features, that had something in them of the antique Roman greatness, were the features of one used to action and command, but their eagerness of authority had been tempered by time and trial into an expression of that iron patience which never despairs and always bides its time.

Looking anxiously about him, the man called again, "Lavinella, Lavinella, where are you?"

At the sound of his familiar voice Lavinella feigned to wake from her simulated slumber, and rose languorously to greet the man. "I am here, Master," she said. She looked very pale in the moonlight, and her eyes shone strangely.

The man came down the steps of the terrace and advanced to her, questioning, "Why do you stay so late in the garden?"

Lavinella answered, "The nightingales kept me awake and I came out to hear them nearer. Then they lulled me to sleep and I slept and dreamed."

"What did you dream?" the man questioned.

Lavinella shook her head and smiled wistfully. "I cannot remember. My dreams were spun out of moonbeams and the notes of birds. I cannot remember my dreams, but they were beautiful dreams."

The man seemed to frown a little at the fanciful-

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ness of her discourse. "It is time for you to awake from your dream," he said, austere.

The austerity of his voice startled the girl. "Master, what do you mean?" she asked.

The man motioned to her to seat herself on the bench, and placed himself by her side, sitting where her lover had sat so short a time before. "Sit by my side, child," he bade, "and listen wisely, for the time has come when you must cease to be a child and become a woman."

Lavinella gazed at him with troubled eyes. "What has happened?" she asked, in a low voice, suddenly fretted by an inexplicable fear.

The man answered slowly, almost sternly: "You do not know who I am. You do not know who you are. The time has come to tell you, and to tell you what you have to do."

The girl's trouble and wonder increased with what she heard. "Who am I?" she asked.

The man answered her with the same grave sternness in his speech. "You have long been nameless," he said, "but now I bring you back your name and give you mine. I am your kinsman, Pandolfo Orsini; you are Lavinella Orsini."

The words fell from him slowly, solemnly, like the measured beating of some bell of doom.

Lavinella gave a cry of wonder. "Am I of the Orsini?" she asked. She knew that the great house was famous in its glory and its shame, as unyield-

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ing in its exile as it had been magnificent in its time of pride.

The man bowed his head. "Years ago," he said, "when you were but a babe, it was thought well to set you apart in a place of safety far away from the others of your house. For your house was hated by the spawn of Spain who now rule in Rome, and it was known that your horoscope had predicted for you that you should restore the fortunes of your people, and it was feared that the Spaniards would strike at your life. So it was reported that you were dead, and in the shelter of that report you lived safely in a humble dwelling in the hills until the time came when I brought you here to fit you for your purpose."

The world seemed reeling and changing about Lavinella in the throes of some tragic catastrophe. "What have I to do?" she asked, sadly, with the sadness of one predestined to dread events.

Pandolfo looked at her with a glow in his fierce eyes. He seemed in his strange exaltation like some ancient priest baring a victim for the sacrifice. "A great deed," he cried, "to rid Italy of a tyrant!"

"What am I against a tyrant?" Lavinella asked, sadly.

Pandolfo answered her with his gaze fixed upon her face. "Listen heedfully. There is a man living who would make himself master of all Italy. You are a woman of Italy. This touches you."

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Lavinella sighed. "I am a woman of Italy—but where are the men that should strike at this tyrant?"

Pandolfo shook his head. "He is guarded too well for men to get at him. His body is always swathed in a coat of mail as close as silk and as strong as marble. His bravos are ever about him. No man can get within dagger-length of him."

He paused, and Lavinella asked, "Who is this tyrant?"

And Pandolfo answered, simply, "Cæsar Borgia."

Lavinella still questioned as one that strives unavailingly with destiny. "What can a woman do against Cæsar Borgia? Why should I be the woman?"

"I will tell you," Pandolfo answered, speaking in a measured cadence, as if he were murmuring a dirge. "Your father was Giovanni Orsini. He was slain, an unarmed, helpless man, by Cæsar Borgia. Your mother, Lauretta Orsini, was shamed and stained to self-slaughter by one of Cæsar's people, at Cæsar's order, to fatten Cæsar's hatred of your kin. Your brother, Cosmo Orsini, torn from school to be a tyrant's plaything, was found one morning in the Tiber, starred with wounds. He was murdered by Cæsar Borgia."

Lavinella had listened to his words with raging blood that seemed first to turn to ice and then to turn again to fire. "Is this true?" she whispered.

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Pandolfo raised his hand to heaven. "By the Most High, I swear it."

The girl bent close to him with a voice passionate with hate. "How can I kill him?" she whispered.

Pandolfo answered as one whose plans are all prepared. "You must leave here to-night, at once. I have some reason to fear that Gandia, who is in secret treaty with our people, has some knowledge of our secret, and I do not trust Gandia. I will take you to the house of a Jew who is in our purposes and councils. He, who deals in rare and costly luxuries, shall bruit your praises to Cæsar amid other traffic of manuscripts and painted cloths and models and images, for this Cæsar loves all comely things very dearly. Cæsar shall send for you. You shall be all grace, all patience, as a child of joy must be."

Lavinella looked at him with horror in her eyes and horror in her voice. "I?" she cried. "I? You tell me that I am of the Orsini and with the same breath you command me to play the harlot?"

Pandolfo answered her inexorable and insistent. What to him was the fate of a girl when weighed against the death of the tyrant? "You. It is the only way to strike at the Borgia, to strike at him through a woman, and no woman in all Italy has a greater right to be the Judith of this Holofernes."

Lavinella echoed his words with a groan. "The Judith! Ah!" She was thinking of what her dear

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lover had said to her so short a time before when he had likened her in her beauty to an avenging Judith.

Pandolfo looked at her curiously. "What is the matter?" he asked. For a moment he felt as if there was something in the girl's compliance—though he had never doubted getting it—which puzzled him.

The girl shook her head. "Nothing. Go on."

Pandolfo dismissed his doubts and continued: "The tyrant will be unarmed to your tenderness. You have learned how to stab. Let one stroke serve."

At his words her woman's instincts struggled within her against her risen hate. She understood now why he that was her dancing-master had, under pretext of teaching pantomime, insisted on her practising strokes with the dagger and had lessoned her in sword-play. "Must I do this?" she pleaded.

Pandolfo sharply struck an angrier note. "Are you unready to avenge your father, your mother, your brother, all the wronged and slain and tortured of your kin? Are you unworthy to wear the name of the Orsini?"

Lavinella answered him firmly. "I hope not, but you have taken me unprepared."

Pandolfo went on, with a gesture of impatience: "You have been prepared for this through all these

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years. You have learned to dance and to sing and to be skilled in books, that you may wear such graces as the better kind of wantons wear. You have been taught the use of arms that when Cæsar is supple under your spell you may deal him the unexpected death. You are happy to be chosen for this business."

As he spoke, sternly and menacingly, his words stirred in her all her fierce sense of duty to her race and hatred to the enemy of her race.

"Well," she said, quietly, "I am content to be chosen. Let us say no more."



## VII

### "FAREWELL"

PANDOLFO rose. "Come with me," he said. "If I am right in fearing that Gandia's eyes are prying on our quiet, there may be no time to lose. We must be gone at once."

He made as if to take her hand and conduct her to the house, but Lavinella lingered. "Go before," she begged. "I will follow you instantly." And when she saw the surprise on his frowning face she added, hastily, "I would but say good-bye to my trees and my birds and my dreams."

"Be quick about it," Pandolfo commented, laconically, and so turning left her, crossed the lawn, ascended the steps of the terrace, and disappeared among the trees.

When she was left alone again Lavinella fell upon her knees before the marble bench and moaned. All her beautiful world was shattered. A few minutes before, no more than a quarter of an hour, she had thought herself the happiest woman in Rome, in Italy, in the world. She loved and was loved by the perfect lover—young, comely, devoted, pas-

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sionate, with the face of a hero and the speech of an angel—who had come like the vision of a dream into the deep peace and calm happiness of her girlhood, and had filled it with a glory beyond words, beyond thoughts. Though her lover were no more than a poor student, with his wit for his weapon and his songs for his fortune, she was as proud of his coming as if he had been Cophetua and she the beggar-maid, and she had gone to his extended arms as gladly and as confidently as to a promised shelter from all sorrows and all ills.

Now in the face of this revelation all her happiness and all her hopes lay broken before her. She was a fated minister; she was a trained instrument; she was the daughter of a great and exiled race, doomed as it seemed from her very birth to a terrible and hideous duty. She must do what she had been told to do; she must accept the task appointed for her. No thought of rebellion against those grim conditions came into her mind. She was of the Orsini; the Orsini had been ruined; her nearest and dearest had been the victims of a tyrant's wickedness; it was no more than the law of her blood that she should avenge their injuries at whatever cost to herself. But the price was hard to pay. A month ago, had that grim necessity been declared to her, she would have accepted it with some natural horror but with an uncomplaining obedience. Now, however, her spirit was wrung with anguish, for she had

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known and welcomed and worshipped the best that life could give her only to learn that she must bid it farewell.

"Dear God, I must lose my lover. I may die in this duty. I may never see his dear face again. Yet even if I die I shall serve him, for he said that Cæsar Borgia had slain his brother as he slew mine—so our vengeance is his vengeance. But I must go without good-bye."

She paused a moment in her sobs, as if seeking some means by which she might communicate to her lover, and as she did so her eyes fell upon the lately neglected book on which her lover's hand had traced such sweet assurances of his love. She caught it up and, opening it, bent it back so that one of the unused pages at the beginning was visible. Drawing a tiny dagger from her girdle, she pricked her arm with the fine point and wrote in her blood on the vacant page the one word "Farewell." Then, leaving the open book upon the bench, she slowly crossed the lawn in the direction taken by Pandolfo, and she, too, disappeared among the trees.

For a little while all was silence in the garden save for the intermittent song of the nightingales, the faint stirring of the leaves in the spring wind, and the light lispings of the fountain. Then the quiet was disturbed by a sound as if some one in the street outside was trying the door in the wall and

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finding it fastened. There came three strokes of a hand against the door, and again for a while such silence as before, broken only by singing birds and rustling leaves and laughing water. In a little, over the top of the high wall the head of a man appeared, and then his shoulders, and a few moments later Michelotto was straddled on the summit of the wall and peering down into the garden. There was a tree close to the spot where he sat, and in a moment Michelotto transferred himself from the wall to the tree, and, lowering himself easily from bough to bough, dropped onto the ground. He went at once to the bolted door and opened it.

"Enter, my lord," he said, and Cæsar Borgia entered into the garden with the bravos at his heels. He looked hastily about him and saw that the place was deserted. He gave immediate orders to Michelotto.

"Quick, to the house! Secure the girl! If you find an old fox by the side of the lamb you can cut his throat. Be brisk!"

Instantly Michelotto and the bravos hurried across the lawn, and, leaping up the steps of the terrace, disappeared out of sight. Cæsar smiled as he surveyed the scene where so short a while before he had played the passionate wooer. "This philandering has been very pleasant," he thought, "and I feel like a green philosopher. But the time has come for action."

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As he reasoned thus, the whiteness of the book pressed out flat caught his eye, and he saw the red trace upon the patent page and picked it up. "What is this?" he asked. He saw that the writing was red writing; he saw that it was blood. He read aloud the word "Farewell," and asked himself in wonder what it meant.

Even while he wondered, troubled and suspicious, Michelotto came running swiftly to him from the house. "My lord," he gasped—"my lord, the house is empty. Not a living soul is in it from root to roof—yet I think the form is warm."

Cæsar turned upon him with a scream of baffled passion and denied desire. "Damnation! Scour the streets. They cannot be far. I am all on fire. Damnation!"

**BOOK II**

**A MORNING IN 'THE LIFE OF CÆSAR  
BORGIA**



# I

## "THE GORGEOUS BORGIA"

DAYS came and went, and the fair Roman spring slowly ripened to its prime. The Romans for the most part worked and played as before, indifferent to the Spanish sway, and heedless of the grasping hands and growing strength of the house of Borgia. The death of the Duke of Gandia had made its nine days' wonder. Folk still were eager to tell strangers with bated breath the grim story of how the Duke's body, hacked and mangled with dagger-strokes, had been fished out of the Tiber, and how the old Pope had mourned, disconsolate as David, over the body of his eldest son, and how his younger son, even Cæsar, after days of careless absence in Naples, had come to him and held long talk with him. There were many who professed to know what had happened at the interview between father and son, glibly acting the agonized Pontiff on the one side and the crafty, masterful son on the other. It was no secret to these wise-aces that Cæsar in some way or other had managed, if not to banish the Pontiff's grief, at least to



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persuade him to a resignation and a calm. There were those that whispered that, if Cæsar's hand were not the hand that had struck the blows that had proved mortal to Gandia, the blows were given at his wish and by his bidding. There were those that whispered that Cæsar, in his father's presence, made little if any secret of his complicity in the crime.

All this was windy rumor, gossamer gossip. The solid truth, patent to all the world, was that Cæsar still stood high in the regard of his father; was that Cæsar now, after his father, moved the most powerful man in Rome. There was plenty of hatred of the Borgias in the city, but it was a hatred that kept its head hidden, for few were bold enough to avow themselves as Cæsar's enemies. The hand that, so they argued it, would not hesitate to strike down a presumably loved and loving brother would scarcely be gentle to an avowed foe. So sedition kept close, either cowering timorously in cellars or garrets, or cloistered circumspectly behind the walls of palaces whose masters had been thick with the dead Duke, very privy to his wishes, and now in his death found themselves leaderless and bewildered.

Those who know Messer Agapito's Chronicle know how Alexander Borgia carried himself after the body of his beloved son had been fished out of the Tiber and lain before him all white and purple

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with its wounds. They know of the fierce extremities of rage and grief in which he indulged, now flooding with tears as he recalled the charms and graces of his dead child, now vomiting the most horrible imprecations upon the head of the unknown murderer. They know how, with his pale, scared cardinals about him, Alexander staggered from room to room of his palace bewailing his loss and denouncing with a childish fury his own offences, to which he now attributed that loss. They know that he confessed himself again and again, as, after having eased his mind of graver sins, the memory of some trivial peccadillo danced into his disordered brain and clamored for self-slaughtering betrayal.

Alexander would not eat, Alexander would not drink, Alexander would not sleep in the extremity of his frenzy. Up and down through the stately rooms and gilded corridors of the great house he wandered with his train of anxious cardinals, ever wailing over the dead youth, ever voluble in denunciation of his own dead past, a broken, hysterical, bemused, and abject man, not unludicrous. There were those among his surroundings that feared at whiles he would lay violent hands upon his life, and that, so fearing, watched him heedfully to prevent him by major force when needs must. There were those, too, that thought him hopelessly crazed by the catastrophe, and believed he would never again

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be able to assert himself or to hold sway over men or be better than a driveller.

But the miserable hours passed into days and Alexander still lived; the miserable hours passed into days and Alexander's wits had not withered. The time came when he ate and drank; the time came when the tortured mind and tortured body found some peace in sleep; the time came when the physicians knew that Alexander would live and be sane and able to rule Rome as before. And with that time and with that knowledge came also the knowledge that Cæsar Borgia had returned to Rome, and when that knowledge came to the ears of the Pope he sent for Cæsar Borgia to come to him.

Cæsar received the order; Cæsar came to the palace; Cæsar entered the presence very quietly. What he saw at the far end of the room was a fat man that seemed all shattered with the rack of passions and abased by the extremity of his anguish from the first prince in Christendom to a querulous oldster. If Cæsar had any mind to analyze his feelings—though indeed he had no such mind—he might have been touched a little by the pathos of this figure, as ignoble in the tragedy of its grief as in the comedy of its triumph. But Cæsar saw things with a simple eye and a simple mind. He knew very well that the man before him huddled there in the big chair was the Pope, his father, and that he,

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Cæsar, had killed his own brother that was the Pope's favorite son, and that this killing was the cause of the degradation of the pompous Spaniard, and that this killing had to be explained to the abject man as a deed at once essential and admirable.

Very quietly Cæsar spoke to the glaring, raging face with its staring eyes. "I am here, father," he said, and said no more.

Alexander dragged himself up a little, resting his hands upon the arms of the chair and leaning forward, the swollen, mottled face twitching, the staring eyes bloodshot. "Cain, Cain!" he gasped, and could say nothing further for the moment, dominated by the composure of the other, his heavy chin falling upon his breast.

Cæsar bore himself with that fastidious politeness which ever stood him in such stead. "Come, father," he said, "it were foolish for such men as you and I to waste time in reproaches or excuses. You have nothing to blame me for and I have nothing to justify."

Alexander gave a great groan and his huge bulk shook loosely, threatening dissolution. His haggard face, already drawn and puckered with grief, was now new-drawn with something like terror. He could not speak; he could only look in wonder at this wonderful murderer.

"Sire," said Cæsar, tranquilly, "between great men there is little need for much speech. You

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loved Francesco, and you grieve for him; that is natural. I did not love Francesco, nor he me, and I grieve for him not at all; that is also natural."

The Pope found words at last. "Was it natural, parricide, to kill your brother?"

"Quite natural," Cæsar answered, calmly. "The man stood between me and the things I want to have, the things I mean to have. He was a nothing, weak every way. Had he been the cardinal you made, he would have been as happy as the day is long, and his body need never have bobbed in the Tiber. But I that mean to make a great empire, I that am soldier, you must needs make me cardinal and cripple me from the beginning. Happily for me, happily for you, I was not so to be crippled. Francesco was in my way, and I pushed him out of it—that is all. Had you been in my way, I would have pushed you out of it as surely. But you do not stand in my way; you are my great ally—and I am yours. With you for king of Christendom there is no saying what we may not compass, you and I, if we work together."

Alexander stared at Cæsar, speechless. Passions of all kinds he could understand, but this passionless argument, this composed taking of terrible things for granted, bewildered him. Yet, if he were silent, his eyes questioned, and Cæsar answered them.

"Father," he went on, "if Francesco had died

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in his bed or died in a brawl over a wanton, as he very well might have died, you would have grieved as you have grieved, suffered as you have suffered, wept as you have wept. That had to be if you outlived him, and that, therefore, may be said not to count. Let us set so creditable a sorrow on one side and look at the great facts of our game. It is my purpose to make Italy again what she once was, a great empire; to combine these little, bastard, brawling states into one packed federation, and of that federation we, the Borgias, you and I, you the Pope and I the Pope's son, shall be the heads. We shall make the name of Borgia forever illustrious; we shall build up a kingdom that shall defy time; we shall live in the greatness of glory while we endure, and in everlasting fame when we have passed away. I shall eclipse Roman Cæsar. You shall be the pope of all popes, the pattern and example for ages yet to change. Could Francesco have thought of this? Could Francesco have done this? Francesco was my enemy, but also Francesco was your enemy, and you should be grateful to me for clearing him from your path."

Alexander stared at the speaker in an awed fascination. Cæsar showed so placid yet so earnest, so quiet yet so convinced; there was no ostentation either in his words or in his carriage; he talked very frankly and yet affably, as might the reasonable interpreter of some unanswerable oracle.

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Alexander tried to articulate words, and his lips twitched with the effort, but no words came, and Cæsar, after a patient interval, addressed him again, still in the same even, amiably pitched, assuring voice:

“Consider, father, the misfortune if this foolish fellow had been allowed to live. I should have stood in the shadow fretting at my impotence, while he, the man of no energy, the man of no enterprise, the man of no invention, witless, pulseless, spiritless, he would have swayed your counsel, he would have urged inaction. He, dedicated to all the slothful pleasures, would have left you in the end no more than you are, if not less. I, on the contrary, promise you glory now and hereafter. These hands of mine will gather Italy together and make us her masters. This heart of mine, that beats so steadily behind my ribs, will inspire you with courage, with resolve, with enthusiasm. You and I, father, side by side, shall play such a game in Europe as never princes have played yet. I should have had no hand in the game had Francesco lived; I should only have withered in the crimson obscurity of a cardinalate, and should have seen with deploring eyes the greatness of the papacy decay amid the meaningless frivolities of a petty court.”

The eyes of Alexander were fixed upon his son. The words that son uttered seemed to affect him like an incantation. Cæsar saw that he was

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winning what he had resolved to win, and he went on:

"Sire, if you want to love a son, love me. If you want a son's love, take it from me, for, believe me I am worth loving. Act as I advise, and in a week's time you will cease to regret Francesco, in a month's time you will have forgotten that Francesco ever existed. The father who has Cæsar Borgia for son has need of no other children—not even of Lucrezia," he added, with the first faint jest of the interview wrinkling his lips.

The Pope, pressing his swollen hands upon the claws of the chair, raised himself with a great effort to an erect position. If he had any thought in so doing to dominate Cæsar, he saw at once that the thought was vain. Cæsar looked up at him with the same tranquil, determined face, moved only by as much of a kindly smile as the graveness of the occasion permitted.

"Are you a devil, Cæsar?" Alexander gasped.

Cæsar shook his head.

"No, father, only a reasonable man who means to do great things before he dies, and who knows the brevity of life and values time and scores every point he can. We must not speak of this past business any more. Between men of the world such a topic once discussed is best forgotten; but I promise you that you will find in me an affectionate son, and I promise you that by-and-by, when I have



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done some of the things I mean to do, you will be glad to prove my affectionate father. Have I your permission to withdraw?"

With the same changeless calm Cæsar advanced toward the Pontiff, and, taking his inert right hand, knelt decorously while he pressed his lips to the jewel of the sacred ring. Then with a profound obeisance he moved slowly backward across the floor, and with a final reverential salutation passed out of the presence.

Alexander Borgia stood for some seconds in the attitude in which Cæsar had left him, his breast heaving, the muscles of his face working in ugly convulsions, as if he were in the throes of words that he was unable to utter. Then suddenly he gave voice to a hideous, piercing scream and fell in a huddle on the floor. His alarmed attendants running in at the sound found Alexander Borgia in a fit. But he recovered from that day, and the next day, or the day after, he forgave Cæsar and took him to his arms. Cæsar's logic was too much for him; these were arguments no Borgia could resist.

## II

### "AGAPITO'S CHRONICLE"

ALL this Agapito knew, but all this Rome did not know then or thereafter, and for Rome and the Romans the question of the death of the Duke of Gandia was a nine days' wonder, after Cæsar's return. When the nine days' wonder had yielded to the tenth that was supposed to bring with it forgetfulness and indifference, two men sat together one sunny spring morning in a room in Cæsar's palace. One of the men was busy writing, the other man was busy watching. It was a pleasant room to write in, for it was high and broad, and it had a great, pillared balcony that looked down upon a public place and that let in with liberality the sunlight and the soft air. It was a pleasant place to watch from to one who sat in that same balcony, for, when the eye was tired of studying the antics and vagaries of the crowd below in the public place, it could wander far afield over the clustered roofs of Rome and rest contented with green vistas of the distant Roman country. The man who sat at the table and wrote was Messer Agapito da Amalia,

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that was Cæsar's favorite secretary. The man who sat in the window was Michelotto Corella, that was Cæsar's favorite bravo. Messer Agapito was busy upon his great work that was to immortalize him, his life of the most puissant, noble, and valorous prince, Cæsar Borgia; so busy as to have no ears when Michelotto called to him from the balcony. Michelotto's gaze found quite enough to interest it in the public place below him, thronged as it was with people, without need of travelling for further diversion over the roofs of Rome to the distant country.

Messer Agapito was a remarkable man in the eyes of all that knew him, but especially in his own eyes. In an age of scholarship, his scholarship was distinguished; his Latin seemed to well limpidly from the purest Ciceronian fountain, and he could write Greek verses which many were pleased to say, and Messer Agapito agreed with them heartily, were worthy of Theocritus. No man in Rome was more learned in coins or a better judge of medals. No man in Rome professed a purer enthusiasm for the poets and philosophers of the ancient world, or had the cabinet of his memory more richly stored with appropriate quotations for all imaginable purposes. No man in Rome was more glib in the recitation of such pearls of thought. Nor were there many in the Eternal City better qualified to turn a neat sonnet or amorous canzonet.

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In this last particular he was often able to render great service to Cæsar in Cæsar's love-affairs. For women like verses, not indeed as they like jewels, but as they like flowers and praises and kisses, and while Cæsar was always ready to give the women who pleased him at any particular moment their hearts' desires in trinkets, he had neither the leisure nor the inclination himself to compose verses. It was not, he held, the duty of a great captain to waste his time in such fashion, any more than it was his duty to seek excellence in painting or in sculpture or in music. These things were for artists, who were the servants and slaves of great captains. When, therefore, any of Cæsar's mistresses had to be served with song, it was Agapito who elaborated the conceits and framed the rhymes which came to the fair as if from the lips of Cæsar.

It was not, however, on his skill in verse that Messer Agapito relied for renown. What most, in Messer Agapito's belief, justified his confident hope of fame was his great history of his hero and master. Even Cæsar Borgia. On this he had now been busy for some years past, and he was daily enlarging, elaborating, and beautifying its pages. On this work, as we know, Messer Agapito was now engaged, and from this work, as he wrote, he now and then murmured to himself the musical, sonorous cadences. He began, of course, with an account of the house of Borgia, and, not content with

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an ancestry which professed to have claims to the crown of Aragon, he was at pains to trace for them a more remote and more remarkable genealogy. With no little thought and ingenuity Messer Agapito invented a son of Priam that accompanied Æneas on his flight from Troy, but who, breaking away from the son of Anchises at some point of their wanderings, came, after many adventures, to Spain and there founded a new Troy, for which he imagined a history very similar to and scarcely less memorable than that of the parent city.

From this heroic Trojan adventurer and his race Agapito traced directly the illustrious family of Borgia. But Messer Agapito had the good sense to see that the ancestors of his hero were of very slight importance in comparison with the hero himself, and he therefore dismissed not merely the mythical but the undoubtedly historical creatures of his genealogy in a comparatively small number of pages, only insisting as he progressed upon the virtues, courage, and wisdom of individual members of the house, in order that he might show later how all these virtues, courages, and wisdoms were united and absorbed in the person of Cæsar. When he came to Cæsar's immediate progenitor, the river of his mellifluous prose widened out into a shining estuary, for Alexander Borgia was alive, and Alexander Borgia was Pope, and Alexander was, in the eyes of Messer Agapito, a very important person,

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whom it were well to praise with a lavish pen. Further, it was patent to so accomplished an historian that the greater the laudation lavished upon Alexander, the more remarkable his gifts and character were made to appear, by so much the more would the glory of the great man's greater son be served when the time came for the estuary to lose itself in the wide ocean of Cæsar Borgia's fame.

So Messer Agapito painted his picture of the Pope in the brightest of color, praising his statesmanship, his skill in finance, his spiritual exaltation, his splendid magnificence, all with an eye to showing how, later, all these great attributes were repeated and increased in the Pontiff's younger son. He even cited with applause that inscription which had been written in letters of crimson upon the Roman walls on the day following the evening when Alexander Borgia was called to the papal throne. This inscription declared that while under Cæsar in the old days the triumphs of the Roman arms made Rome the mistress of the world, Alexander would advance her glory even more than Cæsar, for Cæsar was only a man, while Alexander was a god. The inclusion of this rhapsody in his narrative afforded Agapito an opportunity of pointing out that if a godlike Alexander had supplanted a mortal Cæsar, a yet more godlike Cæsar would avenge his namesake in overpassing a godlike Alexander. This was a passage that pleased Cæsar very much when

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Messer Agapito, who was privileged from time to time to read portions of the chronicle to his master, recited it to him.

It was natural that Messer Agapito's history most glowed and sparkled when it came to deal with Cæsar himself. Messer Agapito had a sense of color, he loved all forms of gorgeousness in dress, in speech, in surroundings, and he was happiest when recording, with all the pomp of an enormous vocabulary and an inexhaustible erudition, the glittering deeds and shining virtues of his hero. It was a somewhat one-sided chronicle, to be sure, but then Messer Agapito had but a one-sided mind. He saw nothing save Cæsar; he prophesied him ever victorious, riding from triumph to triumph, more fortunate than Roman Cæsar, more beautiful than Greek Alexander, the noblest rose upon the brow of chivalry.

Wherever any episode occurred in the career of his hero which did not consort agreeably with Messer Agapito's conception of the man, Messer Agapito took the shortest and the best way with such an episode; he simply omitted to mention it. The result of his labors was, therefore, a flaming panegyric which Cæsar liked even while he smiled at its audacity of omission. For, indeed, Cæsar believed himself to be a very much greater man than even Agapito suspected, and destined to do greater things in the world than Messer Agapito could foresee,

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and he realized the advantage there might be for him in the existence of such a golden chronicle of his past when the yet more golden history of his future came to be written.

In the mean time this chronicle had of late become little more than a kind of monstrous diary, in which the daily events of Cæsar's life were set out at immense length and minute fidelity, and always garnished with such raptures of praise that it would seem as if Messer Agapito's words and comparisons of admiration must soon fail him. But Messer Agapito, deft and shifty gentleman, seemed always equal to his task, with ever some unexpected, un hoped - for word in the treasure-house of his memory to adorn his theme and illuminate his text.

With the private affairs of the Borgia family, except in so far as they concerned his illustrious master, Messer Agapito chose in his chronicle to have little to do. He was well aware that the representatives of the various European powers gathered together at the papal court were in the habit of sending to their masters full accounts of all that came to their knowledge of the conduct of the Pope and his relations, and he guessed that in those confidential letters there must be many and strange tales told of the different members of the illustrious household. Gossip was busy in Rome with the doings of the Borgias, with the curious attachments



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and fierce affections which were said to exist between father and daughter, between sisters and brothers.

Messer Agapito knew exactly what measure of truth lay behind the multiplicity of rumors, but he kept his knowledge to himself.

He left Madonna Lucrezia for the most part out of his pages. He commemorated, indeed, her beauty, knew how to quote with appropriateness in latter days a sonnet or two by Cardinal Bembo, recorded in due season the catalogue of her marriages, and deplored with a decent brevity her successive domestic calamities, without seeking either to justify or explain the causes which had brought those calamities to pass. But as to those things which were whispered about so glibly to the smirching of her fair fame, Messer Agapito was steadily, even stubbornly silent. The lady might have been as chaste as her Roman namesake or as lewd as Faustina for anything that his pen had to say to the contrary.

His discretion as regarded the sister was deftly rivalled by his discretion as regarded the brother. The late and lamented Duke of Gandia was a Borgia; therefore it was essential that he should have his due meed of praise for possessing those virtues which, according to Messer Agapito's creed, no Borgia could possibly be supposed to lack. But the dead Duke had been very greatly the enemy of his brother, and therefore Messer Agapito, whose

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purpose as well as his pleasure in life it was to please his patron, contrived with great ingenuity to belittle the dead Duke at the expense of the living Prince, and to applaud a Providence which, having seen fit to deprive the Pontiff of the support of one of his sons, had been graciously pleased to leave him an heir whose existence would best serve as a prop to the stability of the house and a glory to its annals.

It seems needless to assert that in Messer Agapito's pages the mysterious death of the Duke of Gandia remained a mystery. Messer Agapito was inclined, it would seem, to believe that the unfortunate event was the result of some obscure street brawl with, very possibly, highway robbery for its object, and of course he neglected to record the rumor of the Duke's visit to Madonna Lucrezia on the afternoon of the crime. On the other hand, he painted in words of great beauty and dignity, which he flattered himself had not a little in them of the noble Roman self-restraint, the very natural and becoming grief of Cæsar Borgia over the loss of so near a relative. Cæsar Borgia himself was pleased to smile heartily when his secretary read to him the brief but affecting paragraph in which his fraternal woe was recorded, and later he nodded his head in emphatic approval when Messer Agapito described a tender meeting between the bereaved Pontiff and his surviving son, and recorded the fact that the two

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men, with a touching appreciation of the fitness of things, forbore then or thereafter to make any mention of the dead man's name.

As for Cæsar himself, he troubled very little about what any of his family did or what any human being might choose to say about them or their deeds, and he displayed a like blithe indifference to any statements, whether slanderous, calumnious, or accurate, which might be made about him. "Talk does no harm," he would say, and could never or seldom be kindled into resentment against any mere libeller or reciter of Cæsarean sins. But woe betide the man whose acts tended in the slightest degree to thwart any purpose cherished by the Prince. Cæsar's great ambitions were carefully fostered; his wildest dreams of empire were judiciously built on cautious preparations. He never struck a great blow without being sure that it was worth his while to strike it; and every act of his life was directed toward the common aim of his own glorification because he was so firmly convinced that he deserved to be glorified. Much as Messer Agapito admired his master, Cæsar was a bigger man than even Messer Agapito believed him to be.

Cæsar, to do him justice, wasted no time in speculations as to his character. He no more exulted over any of his actions than he ever regretted any of them; he was content to persist in his personal ambitions without reflecting upon his personal

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merits or defects. It never occurred to him to think of his conduct as moral or immoral. He was aware that he existed, and in existing had certain desires, appetites, tastes, ambitions, all of which he was quick to gratify when they stirred him. The sheer pleasure of physical gratification was unvexed by any questioning. He never thought of himself in set terms as a strong man; he thought of himself simply as Cæsar Borgia. He was strong as the tiger is strong, and he acted on his strength instinctively as the tiger acts, and knew neither qualms nor queries. If he desired any luxury, he satisfied his desires, naturally and as calmly as a wayfarer being thirsty would slake his thirst at a road-side spring. If he wanted anything, he took it, reaching out his comely hands to grasp it, and what he once held he kept as long as he listed and no longer.

Herein he seems to have differed not a little from his father. Alexander may be believed to have liked to play the part of a pope profligate, to have taken a kind of histrionic satisfaction in his splendor and his audacity and his strange amusements. He eyed the world defiantly, as it were, challenging it to show him another so splendid and so sensual as he; he played to the gallery; he craved and wooed applause, if not for the part he was playing, at least for the way he played it. But with Cæsar it was no such matter. He was content to be Cæsar Bor-

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gia, and he did not care a fig whether men praised him or blamed him, applauded or hated him. The execration of a world, the adoration of a world, would make no difference to his purposes. He meant to be a great ruler because authority and dominion were good things in themselves. He meant to be greater than Cæsar, because he considered Cæsar the greatest man of the old Roman world, and it would give him keen pleasure to be the greatest man of the new Roman world.

It was so also with his whimsical digressions, which he indulged in, not because he thought them whimsical, but because he found them agreeable. Those orgies in which he so often took an amused part, those flaming carousals of lusts and nakedness and shameful display and spilled roses and spilled wine, orgies which most of those that shared in them, from Alexander downward, enjoyed with a morbid consciousness that they enjoyed them because of their corruption, their nakedness, their lewd departure from the common way of life, these orgies Cæsar took delight in simply because they delighted him. It added no appreciable zest to his pleasure that these obscene sports should be forbidden. He wanted lasciviousness if he was lasciviously inclined, just as if he wanted exercise he rode a horse or played a game, and was as serenely enthusiastic about the one as about the other so long as each amused him. A dance of naked courtesans diverted

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him as the painted figures of a Grecian jar diverted him; each gave him pleasure for the moment, and of each, as of all things, he asked no more. It was this very simplicity of strength, this directness of aim, sensual and mental, that left him not altogether comprehended, even by so intimate a servant and so keen an observer as Agapito, who, being of a tortuous mind himself, was ready to believe that all other men must be like-minded, according to their degree of intellect.

### III

#### “AUT CAESAR AUT NULLUS”

**I**F all the workings of the Borgian mind were not revealed to the scribe, one fact was agreeably plain to Messer Agapito—the death of the Duke of Gandia had greatly changed for the better Cæsar’s present fortunes and the possibilities of Cæsar’s future fortune. That crimson cardinal’s coat, which Cæsar had ever found such thankless wearing, he had now shed from him with great joy. The initial steps of his entry into the priesthood had been retraced. Cæsar was again a layman, was now a declared soldier, and, as the eldest son of the Pontiff, the successor to those offices which had been held by his late brother. The road he chose to tread seemed to lie plain and straight and fair before him, the ambitions which he was at last free to realize grew swiftly with the growth of his days of emancipation from the thralldom of the cardinalate. Each new hour seemed to bring with it to Cæsar its gift of increasing power and its desire for further splendor and mightier mastery. Schemes that were no more than mere dreams in

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the mind of the Cardinal Cæsar became feasible and reasonable purposes in the mind of the Captain Cæsar. In his new condition Cæsar was likened by the shrewdness of Agapito to a newly awakened giant that stretches himself and begins to realize his strength and to pluck up trees for pastime before beginning to remove mountains.

It had grieved Messer Agapito not a little to discover that, while floating on this flood-tide of triumph and glowing in the sunshine of success, his master was still so little of the perfect statesman as to be troubled by a private care. What that care was Messer Agapito knew well enough, for Cæsar, who, being a good judge of men, knew Agapito trustable and trusted him thoroughly, kept few secrets from him. He knew, and marvelled sadly in the knowledge, that the great Cæsar, who had taken for his proud device "*Aut Cæsar aut nullus*," should condescend to differ so strangely in this from his Roman namesake. If Cæsar of Rome deigned to play with a woman, even when that woman were called Cleopatra, for very sure he had never fretted for her absence or mourned over her loss. Yet this was what Agapito's Cæsar was doing. He was chafing because some kissable girl had slipped through his fingers and was not to be found for fresh kissing. It was a thousand pities that the iron breast of Cæsar should harbor this weakness, but Messer Agapito consoled himself with the



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thought that Cæsar was still young, and that time would wean him from such foolishness. The fact that Messer Agapito himself did not greatly care for ladies may have had its effect in influencing his judgment in the matter.

On the table in front of Agapito while he wrote lay a stately symbol, a great sword in a gold-and-crimson sheath. Agapito now, as if in a kind of commentary on his thoughts, rose, and, taking up the weapon, drew the shining blade slowly from its splendid house and looked at it curiously and admiringly. This was the glove that Cæsar had commanded to be made for him as the new standard-bearer of the Church. One-third of the steel on each side was cunningly engraved with images of a warlike kind, and all were conceived in honor of the earlier Cæsar, the implication naturally being that the homage rendered to the elder was also rendered to the younger of the name.

At the point where the curved hilt clinched with the steel were inscribed in capital letters the words "CUM NUMINE CÆSARIS OMEN," which seemed, as it were, to place all the forces of Rome under the invocation and protection of the greatest soldier of the ancient world. Above this, on both sides of the blade, the metal was divided into four spaces, each with its particular picture. On the one was the Goddess of Faith enthroned, inscribed with the tributary motto "FIDES PREVALET

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ARMIS." On another was represented Julius Cæsar carried on his triumphal chariot, with the flaming, flaunting motto that the Borgian Cæsar had taken for his own, "AUT CÆSAR AUT NULLUS"—Either Cæsar or nothing. On another appeared the knights and legionaries of a Roman army crossing the Rubicon, with the famous phrase circumscribed, "JACTA EST ALEA," which told that the lot was thrown. In another, a representation of a human sacrifice offered to the bull Apis by slim, fair, dainty, naked priestesses burning incense before the grim altar, which appeared here to represent not merely the Egyptian deity, but the terrible red Borgian bull.

It seemed to Agapito, smiling grimly as he surveyed the sword, that in the image of the human body the cunning artificer who had worked so skillfully upon the steel might well have contrived to trace the lineaments of the dead and buried Duke of Gandia. To Agapito, as he looked, the splendid sword in its glory of chasing and subtle workmanship seemed a kind of epitome of the pride, the passion, and the lusts of Cæsar, from the haughty parodying of the fame of the great Roman on the one side to the ironic effigy of the Borgian bull masquerading as an Egyptian god on the other, from the trampling of the lances and the eagles across the memorable stream to the naked women that danced in fantastic ceremony of consecration.

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"There," he said to himself, as he lifted the point of the ponderous weapon to the lip of the sheath—"there is Cæsar's present." As he pushed the sword home he added, "There is Cæsar's future." As he laid the weapon again upon the table the queer thought came to him—how would Cæsar's past seem hereafter to men who might handle that weapon as he had just handled it, when Cæsar and he and all their time were dust?

While Messer Agapito had been delighting himself with the sight of the shining sword, Messer Michelotto had remained on his perch in an angle of the window with his eyes steadily fixed upon the public place below, thronged as it was on that morning with burgesses and citizens of all degree. After a while what he saw seemed to interest him so much that he found it necessary to share his interest with some one, and the only man at hand was Messer Agapito. Messer Agapito was not altogether a fellow to Michelotto's taste, for he carried himself as one that was superior to and disdainful of a mere bravo, whereas Michelotto always wished it to be remembered that in the first place he was much of a gentleman, that in the second place he was something of a scholar, and that his bravoship only came third in the catalogue of his qualities. However, there was no one else to appeal to, so he called loudly, "Messer Agapito."

Agapito raised his head. "You spoke?"

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Michelotto nodded. "I did, master secretary. I am not a garrulous man, but I spoke."

Agapito looked at him with something of a languid interest. Having finished with the sword, he was now anxious to be back at his book again. "What did you say?" he asked, as he seated himself and ostentatiously took up a quill.

Michelotto came away from the balcony and his study of the people in the place and approached the table where Agapito sat. "I said nothing but your name, Messer Agapito, but I meant to add something more. The people seem to me to be queer down there in the little place."

Agapito looked a little more curious. "How queer?" he asked.

Michelotto explained. "Like ants in an ant-run, scurrying this way and that way, purposeless, meaningless pygmies. But to-day they seem restless to some purpose, like mites in a cheese who expected or dreaded the end of all cheeses."

Agapito smiled faintly. "You patter parabolically. What is your meaning?"

Michelotto twitched his shoulders. "I do not know. I am all a-tingle, like folk on a fine day when a storm is brewing. Below there in the piazza they look to me to be waiting for something strange to happen. If I were a fool I should say there was some plot hatching against Cæsar, but I know there can be no plot against Cæsar."

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Agapito tickled his lip with the tail end of his pen. "You are very wise. Why not?"

Michelotto laughed roughly. "Because we guard Cæsar too well, master secretary. It is not your wise little writings in your wise little books that will keep him alive, but our hands, our hearts, our daggers. Oh, Cæsar is safe enough."

"May Cæsar live and live forever," Agapito said. What he thought was that he was taking assurance that at least Cæsar's name should live forever in a great history.

Michelotto grunted agreement. "And a day," he added; "give him a day over."

Agapito had got on his hobby-horse now, and proceeded to rock it at Michelotto. He aired some sentences from his great work with a labored air of improvisation. "I find Cæsar," he said, "as I think other ages will find him, the noblest man recorded in history. It is but a little while since a sad chance made Cæsar his father's heir, and see how already he adorns his magnificent dignity. Look at him in one way, as the great Prince, the gorgeous Borgia, patron of the Arts, with a multitude of painters, sculptors, poets ever at his heels, all seeking the water of life from the fountain of his greatness. There is the Prince-patron, the Mæcenæ, one that has the Nine Muses for his mistresses. Behold him again in arms, and you would think his only joy and purpose was to rival the god

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Mars. Take him in the council chamber. What age has seen such a statesman, so rich in wisdom, so weighty in argument, so grave in decision, so resolute in action. He is all men in one, like Julius Cæsar before him. If he did but take it into his head, I think he might become emperor of the world."

Michelotto was not a little tired of Agapito and his phrases. He yawned openly. "With all my heart," he said. Then, his thoughts travelling back to his window-seat and his study of the place below, he added, thoughtfully, "I wonder why they are humming and buzzing so busily to-day down yonder?"

Agapito made a grimace. He was slightly vexed at the bravo's indifference to his words. "It is the people's way," he said, "to hum and buzz. But they are not stinging-bees that you should fear them."

Michelotto laughed a short, dry laugh. "I do not fear the little people, but I wonder why the little people are so restless."

## IV

### THE ARTICHOKE

A CURTAIN was drawn aside and Cæsar Borgia entered the room. The change in his condition had worked little change upon his seeming—perhaps the resolution of his mouth was stronger, the daring of his eyes more defiant. He was sombrely and richly dressed all in a black habit that was thickly sown with silver, as a graceful sign of mourning for his deceased brother, whom he never failed to speak of in graceful terms when he had to speak of him at all.

He had heard the last words of Michelotto, and he spoke concerning them to Agapito, who rose to his feet respectfully. "Who are restless?" he asked, quietly.

"The people in the piazza," Agapito answered.

Cæsar seemed indifferent. "It does us no hurt if they bustle. The fluttering of doves does not vex the eagle." It was Cæsar's humor on occasion to speak of himself and his fortunes somewhat thrasonically. Those that heard him were not always sure whether he spoke in jest or earnest.

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He turned to Michelotto. "Who waits in the antechamber?"

Michelotto answered: "Simeon, the bauble merchant, and Messer Banda Bentivoglio, whom you bade send for."

Cæsar ordered: "Let the fat rascal wait. Send Simeon to me when I ring for him."

Michelotto bowed and left the room. Cæsar again addressed his secretary. "You do not seem merry, Messer Agapito."

It was Agapito's affectation always to look thoughtful. He answered: "It is not my trade to be merry. I watch the world with a grave eye. It amuses me vastly, yet not to the point of laughter."

Cæsar seemed entertained. "Do I amuse you?" he asked.

Agapito made a deprecatory gesture. "My dear lord is outside the range of my mirth."

Cæsar was not to be so put off. "I am no hawk to be hoodwinked, wise Agapito. You would laugh at me as soon as another were I found laughable. Is it not so?"

Agapito answered earnestly and honestly enough, for he adored his master: "I swear, when you are laughable, my lord, I shall think more of crying than laughing. No man ever laughed at Cæsar the First. No man will ever laugh at Cæsar the Second."

"Nor no woman?" Cæsar questioned, with a fine



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smile. He knew and was amused at his secretary's disdain of woman.

Agapito waved the race of women away with a sweep of his pen. "Woman laugh as starlings chatter, for lack of wit. I know little of women."

Cæsar looked at him with an air of amusement as he confessed his own cause to a hearer made melancholy by the confession. "I delight in them, Agapito; I delight in them. So unexpected and yet so inevitable; so capricious and yet so painfully faithful. I have never wasted ten minutes with a woman, for in those minutes I have always culled some new lie, learned some new slyness. They all seem alike, as sheep do, but each of them has her identity to the master-shepherd."

If it was true that women did not very much divert Master Agapito, he was even less diverted by talk about them. But he prudently stifled a yawn under the pretence of a cough as he commented, "Very likely."

Cæsar mocked him. "You are a droll dog, Agapito, to be so interested in state business and to lack interest in women who are the sum of all statecraft. I could deal with a dozen turbulent republics if they sent women for their ambassadors."

Agapito put his fingers to his ears with an air of horror. "I stop my ears at the thought," he declared, as he did so.

Cæsar smiled at him in playful reproof. "There is

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a story," he said, "of the master-painter Leonardo, that when he was a young man he would frequent the market-place where the country folks sold birds, and there it was his caprice and his pleasure to buy the birds from their jailers and open the catches of their wicker prisons and set the captives free—the larks and linnets and the like—to stretch their wings again and sound their notes in the free air. I have myself a not dissimilar whimsy, only it is my caprice to set the spirits of maidens, which are indeed for the most part as blithe and musical as birds, free from the frozen prison of maidenhood and watch how those liberated spirits use their freedom. No virgin uses her freedom precisely as another, and so the pleasure of the student is never palled and the curiosity of the student is never sated."

Agapito nodded with an air of keener appreciation than he felt. He would have, he reflected, if he wished to be an accurate historian, to set down these moods of his master, which seemed to him, as it were, too trifling to occupy the thoughts of a demigod. "I will take your word for it," he said, and said no more. He resolved not to chronicle Cæsar too often in this mood.

But Cæsar was embarked upon a train of thought and was unwilling to shorten sail. "There was," he said, more indeed to himself than to his listener, "a girl whose liberation I longed to study, but a

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maddening chance snatched her from my arms in the very hour that I believed to be my hour of triumph. I have never been the same since, Agapito. There is no fire so ravages the blood as baffled appetite."

Agapito increased his air of curiosity. "I take it," he said, "that you speak of that girl whom you believed to be a child of the Orsini."

"I have good cause to so believe," said Cæsar, gravely. "One whose hand was ever ready to clasp the hands of my enemies told me so."

Agapito either felt or feigned ignorance of Cæsar's meaning. "Could not this man be questioned?" he suggested. "He might give us more knowledge."

Cæsar shook his head. "The man is dead," he said. "There is no help to be had from him."

"Have you had no help," Agapito asked, "from all your army of spies?"

"None," said Cæsar, sourly. "Rome has been turned inside out like an old glove, but the girl I seek has vanished like a dream. Let her go."

He seemed to make an effort to shake off the melancholy which brooded over his baffled spirit when he thought or talked of his lost love. Agapito strove to cheer him. "Old Rome is full of fair women," he insinuated.

Cæsar rejected the suggestion passionately. "Were Rome one woman, and were that woman

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as fair as Aphrodite when first she dimpled from the sea, I'd put her by me if she stood between me and this girl I long for."

He had been pacing up and down the room as he spoke, but now he came to a halt before the secretary and addressed him vehemently.

"Ah, Agapito, it is the unattainable in life that we pine for — the untasted fruit, the unplucked flower, the Tantalus cup full of wine from the gods snatched away from our mortal lips. These are the griefs that are inconsolable. It wrings my heart to think that there is a woman living in the world who can say that she escaped chaste from Cæsar's arms and left Cæsar unsatisfied."

"Perhaps she is dead," Agapito suggested. He would have been content to know her so if the knowledge would have brought with it forgetfulness to Cæsar.

"I do not think so," Cæsar answered. "I think I should know if she were dead, and if she were I should be tempted to leap the hoop of life, as the juggler leaps his hoop, that I might find her and triumph over her among the asphodels of Hades, and so, even though no more than as a shade upon a shade, satisfy the desires that rack me."

Again Cæsar paced up and down the room moodily, with his hands behind his back and an expression on his face of hopeless pain that Agapito yearned to banish. How to change this love-

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sick man into the demigod again? Agapito, fiercely resentful of all this bother about a missing maid, racked his brains. At last a thought came to him. "Cæsar, Cæsar," he cried, "that would never do! What would become of Rome, of Italy, without her Borgia?"

Cæsar stopped short in his walk and looked steadfastly at his servant, and the trouble seemed to flee from his face. His clouded eyes cleared and his voice was full and buoyant as he answered him. "I thank you, Agapito. You bring me back again to my true, my only mistress, to Italy. What is the fairest girl in the world to that immortal wanton whose flesh is the brown earth, whose veins are great rivers, whose noble limbs are the Alps and the Apennines?"

When Cæsar gave the rein thus to his rantipole humor the secretary felt that for the moment all was well. Cheered, therefore, by his master's changed mood, Agapito ventured to be playful.

"Do you compare Italy to a woman now?" he asked. "Last week you compared her to an artichoke, which you were going to eat leaf by leaf."

Cæsar laughed now. "It matters little what we compare Italy to," he said, "so long as she be mine; and she shall be mine. I will pluck every leaf of her, every kingdom, every principality, to weave them into a garland for the forehead of the second Cæsar, the greater Cæsar."

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He was riding the high-horse now with a vengeance, and Agapito applauded him. "Well thundered, Cæsar!" he cried.

Cæsar, flushed with a divine spirit of exaggeration, claimed a higher title. "Say, well thundered, Jove!" he answered. "My mood now is like the divinity in the Egyptian legend that goes about the world, hither and thither, seeking the scattered members of her dead son. Like her, I would gather together the ruined bones of what was once an empire and breathe my spirit into them, and quicken them till Italy were again one nation, unconquerable, omnipotent."

Agapito saluted him. "Cæsar Jove!" he cried.

## V

### "CAESAR NEED FEAR NO MAN"

CÆSAR had quite shaken off his melancholy and now seemed only mirthful. "Perhaps," Agapito thought, "he does not really care about the accursed girl, since it is so easy to divert him." While Agapito mused Cæsar spoke.

"Before I build a temple to myself," he protested, "I must see that my house is cleansed. There are some gentlefolk in Rome whom I shall be pleased to be rid of. My sleep will be sweeter when I am quit of them."

There was a smile on Cæsar's face as he said these words which Agapito liked to see. It meant mischief for some one. Who was Cæsar's butt?

Agapito was about to question him when Michelotto entered the room with the air of one that bore news of moment and advanced to Cæsar. "Illustrious," he said, "his eminence the Cardinal Rovere is here and begs for audience."

Master and secretary exchanged glances.

"Tell his eminence," Cæsar answered, "I shall be happy to welcome him to my poor house."

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Michelotto withdrew, and Agapito put a question. "Is the Cardinal Rovere one of those to be got rid of?" Then he grinned cunningly.

Cæsar paused for a moment before he replied. "The Cardinal Rovere is a man I would sooner have for a friend than for an enemy, but I would be better pleased still to know that he was tasting bliss in heaven. He is patient, cautious, slow, plodding. I think he is like a beggar who sits in the hedge by the wayside and begs of all passers-by, and seems to do nothing for himself to mend his fortunes. He is one of those dangerous fellows who protest that they are for no party, that they are for no man, that they are and desire to be no more than quiet servants of the Church, content with the duties each day brings them. I tell you, Agapito, if I could be afraid of any man I might be afraid of Cardinal Rovere."

"Cæsar need fear no man," Agapito murmured.

At this moment the door again opened and Michelotto again appeared as herald of the coming Cardinal. Agapito kissed Cæsar's hand. "I take my leave, illustrious," he said, and passed out of the room by another door as Michelotto introduced the Cardinal. Rovere was very bland, very calm, very portly. Michelotto withdrew, and the two men were left alone. For a moment they stood facing each other, irony in their minds, no show of irony in their watchful eyes. Then Cæsar extend-



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ed his arms and, advancing, clasped Rovere in affectionate embrace. Rovere returned his tender pressure, and, when Cæsar released him, he murmured, fondly:

"I pray for pleasure and peace to you, Cæsar."

Cæsar smiled bright welcome. "You give me pleasure in this visit, your eminence," he said, sweetly. "I hope this visit means that you also give me peace. We should be friends, you and I."

"Should be?" Rovere echoed, protesting with outstretched, plump palms. "We are already friends, Cæsar, and have only to continue, hand in hand, a journey happily begun. Count me among the first of your admirers, your friends, your lovers. There be grudging knaves who are vexed by a great man's fame, by a great man's bearing. I am no such malecontent."

"I am sure of that," said Cæsar, with a great show of eagerness to believe his visitor.

"On the contrary," Rovere continued, "I warm my hands before the fire of your greatness and thank God for the good blaze. I am no partisan; all the world knows as much; I would not wear the colors of any faction; but I am an honest man and my heart kindles at the sight of an honest man." He paused for a moment and then added, as if on an afterthought, with a fine air of candor, "I was your brother's friend."

Cæsar affected an air of melancholy. "I wish I

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could have said as much, your eminence," he answered. "My brother, I fear, had no great affection for me. I wish I could have won his heart. You see, I wear this mourning for him," and he glanced at the silvered sable of his attire that was so rich in its feigned simplicity.

Rovere sighed. "Alas! the poor Duke," he said. "I was with him on the night of his death. We walked a little way together in the cool of the night, talking of idle trifles, but after a while he wished to be alone, and we parted. I thought he was going to some love-tryst. Alas! it proved not so. I wonder shall we ever know who slew him?"

Cæsar shook his head. "We Borgias have numberless enemies. There are many in Rome who would deal me the like death if they had the chance." He paused for a moment, then shot a quick glance at Rovere. "Do you come here, Cardinal," he asked, "to weep with me over Gandia's monument?"

"I come," said Rovere, gravely, "as one that was the friend of your brother to offer myself to be your friend."

Cæsar nodded. "That is well said," he commented, "and generous."

Rovere went on. "As the first proof of friendship, I come to ask a favor of you."

"Ask and have," Cæsar murmured, watching him with shining eyes.

Rovere was quite composed, apparently all un-

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conscious of any irony in Cæsar's speech or manner. He seemed just a plain, commonplace man that had come to do a sensible thing in a sensible way, and thought little, but yet not too little, of the matter. Now he leaned forward and spoke to Cæsar in a voice that was scarcely louder than a whisper. "There is some talk," he said, "among those fools who will be forever talking, of a certain list of names."

Cæsar raised his eyebrows with a well-assumed curiosity, with a well-assumed surprise. "Indeed!" he murmured.

Rovere went on with the same caution in his voice. "It is further said that this list contains the names of those that your late brother counted among the closest of his friends."

Cæsar nodded his head and allowed a look of understanding to illuminate his face. "Yes, yes," he said, "I have heard some talk of such a list."

Rovere's face grew graver. "I am further told," he said, "that the list included the name of my nephew."

Cæsar smiled compassionately. "What of it?" he asked, and then added, still more benignly, "The lad must have his fancies."

Rovere leaned back and rubbed his hands softly together, watching Cæsar the while with quiet eyes. "I am heartily glad," he declared, "that you care to think of it so gently. If the boy—for he is little

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more than a boy in spirits—has unhappily been led away by shrewd adventurers such as that fat fellow Banda Bentivoglio, and showed some inclination to air himself as one of the partisans of your late brother, he now sees and weeps for his folly, and, being full of penitence for his great mistake, he desires most humbly to ask your highness's forgiveness."

Cæsar beamed on Rovere. "It is asked and had," he promised.

Rovere's face glowed with honest gratification. "Since you take it thus kindly," he said, "it would much rejoice him to serve you as rejoice me to know that he was in your service. I should be glad if you will take him into your household and employ him in your business, when zeal and love would be of use to you."

Cæsar's smile increased a little. "I declare, your eminence," he said, "if you were any other man than yourself I should think this offer masked a plan to place a spy among my people."

Rovere looked at his companion with a show of honest horror. "A better thought," he said, "would be to think that I, in proof of my loyalty and friendship, place in your hands a precious hostage. I swear to you that I love my nephew as dearly as if he were my own son."

Cæsar beamed on him affably. "I make no doubt of your friendship and your loyalty, your

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eminence," he said, "and I accept your offer very gladly. Where is your nephew?"

"I brought him with me," the Cardinal answered. "He waits outside in the antechamber. We dared to build so far upon your courtesy."

Cæsar was all suavity, all interest. "Pray call him to me at once," he asked, and Rovere, turning, went to the entrance and, drawing the curtain, beckoned beyond, and the youth that had been waiting entered the apartment and saluted Cæsar reverentially. Ugo da Rovere was a fairly comely personage, with hair so fair as to be almost white. His pink cheeks suggested the health of exercise, his pale eyes were malicious, his flying chin betrayed instability. He was splendidly dressed, all a glitter of gold and crimson tissue and amber-tinted silk, and his fine linen was curiously wrought with embroidery of colored threads. He swam in delicate odors. He aimed to be the master-fop as he aimed to be the master-soldier and the master-lover. Yet he was loved by few women and feared by no soldier. Still, as he was kept in a very rich condition by the Cardinal, and, being cunning, could be generous when generosity served his turn, he was not without some measure of popularity among the golden youth of Rome.

Cæsar greeted him with a great show of friendship. "Your uncle here," he said, resting his hand for a moment caressingly upon Rovere's arm,

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"tells me that you would like to enter my service."

Ugo bowed again. "It is the dream of my life," he said, "to serve Cæsar Borgia."

Cæsar took the youth by the ear and pinched it gently. "Young gentleman," he said, "I have been told, whether truly or not it is for you to say, that you hold me very cheap, that you think very little of my intelligence, and that you mean some day to put me in my place."

The pink cheeks of Ugo were now a blushing red, and he glanced with embarrassed, shifting eyes from Cæsar's amused face to the immovable countenance of his uncle, who stood in the background and watched the comedy. Ugo did not know what to say, but he guessed from the bearing of both men that he had not very much to fear. "These are slanders, great Cæsar," he stammered, and was thinking of other excuses when Cæsar interrupted him.

"Say no more," he commanded; "young blood is turbulent, young tongues are naughty, but it is well and pleasant to be young."

He released Ugo's ear and patted him gently on the cheek.

Ugo would have fallen at Cæsar's feet if Cæsar had not prevented him.

"I worship Cæsar," he protested. "I long to serve him. Let me prove my zeal in your service,

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and let my reward be Cæsar's forgetfulness of any folly of mine."

Now, while Rovere had been talking and while nephew-son Ugo had been smirking, Cæsar had been thinking, and Cæsar had truly found a use for Ugo.

"It is well," said Cæsar, "if all of us could have our dreams so speedily realized. Not only am I glad to accept your offer of service, but you can serve me at once. Messer Leonardo tells me that one of the exiled Orsini, now dwelling in Genoa, has in his house an ancient statue which, according to Leonardo, is a most marvellous piece of work. It is in bronze, Leonardo says; it is perfect, he maintains; and he takes it to be an effigy of Venus. I love such things, and I think the goddess would be more fitly housed in the palace of Cæsar than in the dwelling of a rebel. Will you, therefore, act as my ambassador in this matter, travel at my cost to Genoa, and see if your shrewdness can strike a bargain with the exiled gentleman for his exquisite Venus."

Ugo bowed again, his pink face dimpled with submissive grins. "When shall I go?" he asked.

"There can be no better time than to-day," Cæsar answered, nonchalantly. "Leonardo's praises of the image have aroused in me an unconquerable desire to possess it."

"I will set off at once," Ugo said, promptly. He

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thought he was making rare progress in the favor of the great man.

Cæsar smiled at him. "That is well said. Farewell."

Ugo advanced and kissed first Cæsar's hand and then the hand of his uncle, after which he left the room, swaying delicately as he went, for that was the fashion with such exquisites.

Cæsar turned to Rovere. "Well, your eminence," he said, "it seems that, after all, your nephew is to be neither spy nor hostage, but an envoy in the cause of art."

Rovere looked at him with an air of great gratitude. If he was in reality vexed at the dexterity with which Cæsar had, in accepting the service of Ugo, so handled it that Ugo was wafted off out of the way very pleasantly, nothing that he thought showed in his smooth, smiling face. "The boy is happy in your service and I am happy in my gratitude."

Cæsar protested. "The gratitude is mine," he said. "If I succeed in getting this statue, which I hope—indeed, I long for it more than almost anything in the world—I shall summon you to the first sight of it, for I think you love these toys as much as I do."

"I love them, indeed, very dearly," Rovere answered, "and have some few antiquities of price in my poor house."



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He rose and saluted Cæsar. "I will take my leave," he said.

"I lose you with regret," Cæsar asserted, with a courtesy that well feigned enthusiasm; "but since you needs must go, I feel the loss less since your proffered friendship makes me feel that you are with me in my heart."

## VI

“I PUT NO PRICE ON THIS IDOL”

WHEN the Cardinal had gone Cæsar Borgia walked up and down the room for some time with a still smiling face. He was not displeased with the Cardinal's visit, for it was one of the best possible tributes to his rising power. He was amused at the way in which he had contrived to grant the Cardinal's request without keeping Ugo by his side, and he also hoped sincerely that the youth might be the means of gaining for him the coveted statue, for Cæsar's love for the beautiful creations of the ancient world was as keen as any of his many passions. After a while he paused and struck upon the bell. After a brief interval the curtain was again drawn back and Michelotto entered.

“Simeon, the Jew,” said Michelotto, “abases himself before your greatness, and begs to enter the presence.”

“Admit him,” Cæsar said, and Michelotto introduced Simeon, an ancient Hebrew, merchant of varied wares, habited after the fashion of his kind

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in very sober trappings. Simeon advanced a little way into the room with many gestures of respectful homage. Michelotto kept well between him and Cæsar, and another bravo who had entered at Simeon's heels stood behind him with a drawn sword in his hand.

Now Cæsar and his people knew Simeon well enough, for the Borgia had been brisk and frequent in his dealings with the man, and loved his wares dearly. But it was ever a part of Michelotto's policy as captain bravo to show no trust of any man, and to make it plain to all men that Cæsar was warily warded. Desperate, indeed, and wild-witted must the assassin be who could think to strike at Cæsar's person while Michelotto and his ruffians were at hand. So, though the new-comer was no more than a very suppliant merchant, he was menaced by as many ministers of Cæsar's justice as if he came in flagrant enmity to Cæsar. But Simeon showed no apprehension—indeed, no consciousness—of the precautions that were so patently displayed, advancing and pausing and salaaming, and advancing again, again to pause and salaam with ostentatious Oriental homage. Simeon was a small, peaked wisp of a man with a fringe of gray beard that failed to lend him reverence, a much-wrinkled face, and cunning, shifty eyes that took note of everything in the world and set a price upon it below its value. When he came as near as he

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was permitted to approach Cæsar his genuflections increased, and he extended his arms as if in adoring homage.

Cæsar looked at the cringing figure. "Well, Melchisedek, what do you want with me?"

Simeon fawned on the air as he would have fawned on Cæsar. "May Heaven forever preserve and bless your highness."

Cæsar shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "Heaven may be presumed to do its duty toward a Borgia. Your business?"

Simeon went on, in a whining voice: "I have sometimes served your highness with images of womankind, statues of bronze, statues of marble, statues of alabaster, statues of ivory, statues of flesh."

He grinned lasciviously as he mouthed his last words.

Cæsar interrupted him: "At a fancy price both for ancient and modern."

Simeon protested: "Ah, highness, no; I gave them to you; in a sense, I did but give them to you."

Cæsar looked at him angrily, and Simeon cowered before the glance. "You rascal, does Cæsar Borgia take gifts from an outcast?"

Simeon deprecated his anger: "No, highness, no; I would not dare; but you buy my treasures at cost price, believe me. And I have a treasure to-day. May I come a little nearer, excellence?"

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Cæsar turned to Michelotto. "Let him approach," he ordered.

Michelotto drew back and allowed Simeon to advance toward Cæsar. At a gesture from Michelotto the armed bravo withdrew. Simeon came a little nearer to Cæsar, who carelessly picked up a dagger from the table and played with it, wearing the air of one that did he knew not what.

Simeon spoke behind his hand to Cæsar, whispering: "Excellence, I have a pearl for you, an unthriden pearl—a gem of delicate measure, flawless of form, of voice, of manage. Every part of her is perfect, and the sum is perfection. I am of a patriarchal age, but I swear I was stirred at the sight of her."

"How much?" Cæsar asked, quietly. He knew from experience that Simeon was a credible dealer in prettiness.

Simeon held up his hands in deprecation of the thought that he could drive a bargain in such a case. "I put no price on this idol, excellence. If I were selling her to the Cardinal Rovere I should say, bluntly, so many thousand ducats, take or leave. But to your excellence I say in all candor that I will take the price you please, if you, on trial, approve my judgment."

Cæsar looked ironically at the gesticulating Simeon. "She is no common jade?" he asked, rather

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more to annoy the trader than because he felt any serious interest in the bargain.

Simeon intensified his gesticulations. "To look at her you would say she was an empress. I do not know who she is. She was brought to me by those that trade in such flesh, but I know that she is beautiful. They say she was trained in Venice, and I can well believe it, for she has the Venetian manner. Were you as cold as Adonis you would love her for her artifices. She is compact of the graces; she can sing so and dance so that even the most amorous would not interrupt her in the verse of a song or the step of a measure."

Cæsar was amused by his earnestness. Simeon plainly meant what he said. "How you belaud your baggage, Amorite!" he laughed.

Simeon became voluble again: "I will stake my head on your pleasure and full content, excellence. I have never deceived you yet; I am too wise a jackal to trifle with the lion. If you see, you will taste, and, tasting, know ecstasy." Simeon rubbed his hands. Simeon licked his lips. Simeon was as one of the elders leering at Susannah.

A sullen look came over Cæsar's face. "Send me the girl, but 'tis odds you fail in your prophecies. I am very discontented, fretful, hard to please. There was a girl I wanted who slipped through my fingers, and now her face comes between me and every other woman and chills my kisses. By God,

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I might be bewitched." He flung himself into a seat and sat frowning, feeding on sick fancies.

Simeon renewed his praises cheerily: "My untainted maiden will charm away all memories. You will think you begin to live."

Cæsar waved his hand in sign of dismissal. "I pity you, Simeon, if you prove a liar in these promises. If you prove true I will please even your greed for gold, for indeed I lack diversion and would not haggle for an hour of joy. Bring the girl at once."

Simeon bowed, and his forehead seemed nigh on touching the earth. "I go. In all things your excellence is to be envied, but never, I swear it, more than now. She is the divinest idol." And so, with many retreating abasements, Simeon reached at last the curtained door and disappeared behind the curtain.

## VII

### "PLAYING AT TREASON"

WHEN Simeon was gone Cæsar turned to Michelotto. "Is the old knave to be credited?" he questioned.

Michelotto looked uncertain. "It is very certain that he deals with the best bawd in Venice," he said, "and all vendable maidens are taken to his gates."

"There is no harm in seeing the girl," Cæsar mused. "He has kept faith before, indeed. There was a little figure he sold me, a little Greek figure in colored earth that was worth the price I paid for it. You cannot imagine how cunning those old Greeks were to puff the spirit of life into a few inches of gilded clay. A tiny thing so high," and he measured the distance with his parted hands, "and yet diminutive perfection."

Michelotto whistled. "I know nothing of such matters."

Cæsar seemed to reflect, forgetting the presence of Michelotto. "It is a pity," he said, "that both he who made mortals for his playthings, and those



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mortals who for their playthings carve marble and beat bronze, seem so far asunder in their handiwork. If I were like Pygmalion of old time, I would rather keep my wonder-woman divine in abiding marble than pray that my flawless stone should tremble into fallible flesh. I can understand the mad fellow whom Lucian tells of that loved the marble goddess so hotly. Think of it, changeless beauty, ageless beauty, stainless beauty!"

He shook himself out of his reverie and addressed Michelotto again:

"Is it not strange, Michelotto, how the girl disappeared?"

Michelotto knew well enough what girl was in Cæsar's mind, and Michelotto's face grew gloomy. "Most strange," he answered. "I did not think there was dog or cat that could sneak out of sight in Rome without my knowledge, far less a radiant maid." Indeed, he spoke feelingly, for he was proud of his wisdom in Rome's mysteries.

Cæsar looked at him sourly. "If she be not found soon you may be sorry enough. No more. Let the fat Banda enter. And with him there is no fear; there is no pulse of murder in him. I should as soon think to find an assassin in a parrot, so you need not keep close to my person. The window will be near enough. I shall have some sport with him. I can promise you some diversion if you pay heed."

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Michelotto saluted. "Yes, excellence," he said, and, going to the door, drew the curtain and called into the room beyond, "Signor Banda!" and on the call Banda Bentivoglio entered. Messer Banda looked fatter than ever in the patent agony of his embarrassment and in the pomp of his habiliments, for he had evidently put on his very costliest clothes, and was as gaudy in greens, blues, and yellows as if he had been indeed the brightly plumaged bird to whom Cæsar had contemptuously likened him. Cæsar, sitting at the table, greeted him affably with a wave of the hand. Michelotto withdrew to the balcony and seemed occupied anew with his studies of the crowd below.

There was a long silence in the room, during which Cæsar continued to eye Banda closely, and Banda's perturbation and nervousness grew under that steady gaze. He twitched, he fidgeted, he sweated, his red face shone with the drops on it; he longed to shift his dripping linen.

At last the wretched man ventured to break the silence. "Good-day, excellence," he murmured, and when he received no answer he waited for a while and then essayed some further words. "Your excellence was so good as to send for me." As this brought no response from Cæsar, who still continued to overlook him mockingly, he hazarded in desperation a further appeal: "May I venture to ask why your excellence wished to see me?"

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Cæsar leaned forward a little and questioned him straight and short: "How do you like it?"

Banda stared. All manner of doubts and terrors were drumming at his heart. "Like what, my lord?" he stammered.

Cæsar answered, grimly, "Playing at treason."

Banda was streaming like a river-god, and it seemed to his fevered fancy that the large goutts hissed on his burning face. "I do not understand your excellence," he gasped, but he began dreadfully to believe that worse was coming, and he cursed himself for having played the fool.

Cæsar shook his head as if in protest against prevarication. "There came," he said, "into my hands the other day a small piece of folded paper which seemed of slight moment at first show, and yet it proved to have some interest for me. It was scribbled over with a score or so of names, the names of Roman gentlefolk, some great whales and some little fishes enough. I have my reasons for believing that this little piece of scribbled paper was a list of those in Rome who were tempted or temptable to join a league against my humility with my late brother of Gandia."

"Surely not," Banda stammered, clasping and unclasping his fingers in great agitation. If he had felt hot before, he was icy cold now, for his fears were rigorous, and he cursed his folly anew that had inclined him to Gandia.

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Cæsar's looks seemed to deplore the wickedness of mankind. "Does it not seem incredible?" he said. "And yet, for all it seems so incredible, it must be believed; at least it must be believed by me, at least it must be believed by you."

"By me?" croaked Banda, in a voice that was hardly audible. Awful shadows seemed to be closing in on him, awful fingers to be gripping at him.

Cæsar raised his eyebrows. "I take it that your name is Banda Bentivoglio."

"That is my name," Banda admitted, in a hoarse whisper. He wished with all his heart that he could have denied it.

"Then your name," said Cæsar, slowly, "is one of those written on that little piece of paper I told you of."

In the very extremity of his peril Banda found voice to protest loudly. "Illustrious," he said, "it is possible for any villain in Rome to write my name on a piece of paper."

Cæsar seemed to take note of the argument and to weigh it for what it was worth. "You are very shrewd," he said, "but in this little paper opposite to your name was set a little scarlet cross."

"A scarlet cross!" Banda echoed, now shivering as if he were really cold, though he looked repulsively hot to his spectator. "A scarlet cross!" He could say no more.

Cæsar elaborated his phrase. "A little scarlet

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cross, which, as I guess, means that the person so marked in this list—and there are many so marked—are full of kind inclinations toward the league against my peace.”

Banda shook his head and tried to look innocent. He only succeeded in looking stupid. He had never heard of this scarlet cross, but he had no doubt that it carried the significance Cæsar gave to it. What an ass he had been to belaud Gandia so in his cups! He could think of nothing to say, so he returned again to his former formula. “I do not understand your excellence,” he muttered.

Cæsar smiled urbanely. “I can understand very well that a man may say a word or two in hot blood that he would not care to stand by when he is cool.” Here Banda nodded eagerly, and Cæsar’s urbanity waxed. “I am often misrepresented by those that do not know me; those that know me are not to be misled. Come, come, we will understand each other better presently. But first be so good as to open yonder cabinet and tell me what you see there.”

He pointed as he spoke to a beautiful cabinet of inlaid work of ivory and ebony, where whimsical figures of fauns and nymphs pursued and fled through intricacies of twisting foliage and evolutions of fantastic architecture. Banda, greatly soothed by Cæsar’s blandness, rose in obedience, crossed the floor, and placed his hand resolutely upon a

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little silver key in the door of the cabinet. He seemed, however, to have some difficulty in turning the key, and at length, after he had spent some seconds in futile fumbling, Cæsar called to him, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Banda answered, "The key is very stiff."

"It is a little stiff," Cæsar admitted, "but it yields to a trick of the thumb."

With an effort Banda, thus encouraged, turned the key, and as he did so he uttered a sharp exclamation of pain, which made Cæsar ask, with a great air of innocence, "What is the matter?"

Banda turned to him sucking his thumb ruefully. "I have pricked my thumb," he wailed. He looked very like a fat and fractious baby as he did so, but Cæsar seemed indifferent to his pangs.

"What of that?" he asked, scornfully. "Open the cabinet."

Thus adjured, Banda, still sucking his thumb, pulled open the door of the cabinet with his left hand and disclosed a small inner space as beautifully worked as the exterior, which contained a roll of parchment tied together with a coil of crimson silk, and behind the roll of parchment a small golden phial.

"Take out that paper," Cæsar ordered; and when Banda did so he continued, "Read that paper."

Banda untied the silk, unfolded the scroll, and began to read in his jolly, fat voice, "'This is the

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last will and testament of me, Banda Bentivoglio, of Rome.’” At this point the jollity faded from his speech. He paused and gaped at Cæsar. “What does this mean, excellence?” he quavered.

Cæsar commanded him, impatiently, “Read on, friend, read on.”

Banda ruefully resumed his reading: “‘I hereby bequeath all my lands, houses, goods, gear, and, in fine, whatsoever I possess, to his highness Cæsar Borgia.’” At this point he pretended to laugh, but the pretence was rather pitiable. “Oh, I see, a joke, a very good joke,” he stuttered.

But if Banda strove to laugh, Cæsar was not laughing. “It is no joke, I promise you,” he said, quietly. “Come, come, Messer Banda, you are a bachelor; you have no heir of your body. Do you think me unworthy to inherit your possessions?”

“No, no, my lord,” Banda protested. He was breathing hard now and staring like a man on the edge of a fit.

Cæsar rose and moved toward him. “Good; give me your hand. I like you, Messer Banda.” As Cæsar spoke he held out his right hand, and, taking Banda’s right, clasped it closely. Banda instantly winced and gave another ejaculation of pain.

“Why, what ails you?” Cæsar asked, releasing his victim’s fingers.

Banda whimpered, dismally, “Something hurt my hand.”

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"Your hand seems to be unlucky to-day," Cæsar said. "Let me see." He took Banda's plump palm in his clasp and studied it. "Ah, this ring of mine with the lion's head upon it. In the zeal of my love for you I squeezed your hand too keenly. It is but a scratch when all's said."

Banda, affecting an indifference he was far from feeling, for his fat person was extremely sensitive to any pain, responded, "Nothing but a scratch, excellence."

Cæsar went on: "And what is a scratch to a stout fellow like you. Come, honest Banda, will you make me your heir?"

Banda sighed heavily. "'Tis an honor I dared not hope for, monsignore; but, indeed, I am superstitious; in brief, I feel in no testamentary disposition."

Cæsar looked at him warningly. "Those that go into conspiracies do well to make their wills beforehand, Messer Banda. Conspiracies do not always succeed, you know."

Banda groaned. "Do I look like a conspirator?" he questioned, and showed so pitiful as he spoke, such a trembling jelly of terror, that Cæsar laughed loudly.

"Indeed," he declared, "you do not, yet you may be the more dangerous for your air of plump innocence. Now, if you were involved in a conspiracy against my very humble and very honest



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person, and if that conspiracy should chance to be blown upon and it came to be alleged that Messer Banda Bentivoglio was portion and parcel of that conspiracy, what better proof of his innocence could he desire than the fact that he loved Cæsar so dearly as to make him his heir?"

"It would be strong," Banda hesitatingly admitted. This was the most disagreeable conversation in which he had ever shared, and he wished he were well quit of it.

Cæsar clapped him on the shoulder. "Convincing, dear soul, convincing. 'Tis but a scratch of the pen and all is ended."

As Cæsar spoke he took Messer Banda by the elbow and conducted him gently to the table, to which Messer Banda went as reluctantly as if he were some head of cattle being sent to the shambles. Cæsar carefully spread out the parchment before Banda, thoughtfully selected a quill, and thrust it firmly into Banda's fingers. Hardly knowing what he was doing, Banda scrawled his name.

## VIII

### "A JOKE, A VERY GOOD JOKE"

WHEN Banda laid down the pen Cæsar clapped him gayly on the shoulder. "And now, Messer Banda," he said, "I will wager I know your thought."

Banda looked in terror into the scrutinizing face of Cæsar. "How so, my lord?" he asked, vaguely dreading some new turn in Cæsar's humor.

Cæsar explained: "You are thinking to yourself, you cunning fellow, that the first thing you will do when you get home is to make a new will, cancelling this, and so outwit poor, simple Cæsar."

Banda protested. "Indeed, my lord—" he began, and then gaped, unable fitly to finish.

Cæsar looked sympathetic. "Never protest. The intention does you credit. Indeed, I tender you dearly, and would have you so use me. We are much maligned, we Borgias. They tell wild tales of us and our poisons, moonshine stories all of them."

"Of course," Banda assented, eager to agree with anything. He did not clearly understand the drift of Cæsar's speech.

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Cæsar, seeming not to be aware of his agitation, took up the thread of his tale composedly: "But the story further goes that we who fashion that poison have also the antidote." He extended his hand to the recess in the cabinet and took out a golden phial, held it up, and showed it to Banda. "The clear fluid in this little phial is so potent an electuary that if it be taken within an hour of the poison striking it will clean the victim sweet of all venom."

Banda wailed to him with clasped, imploring hands, "The antidote, my lord, for God's sake, the antidote!"

Cæsar looked down at the wallowing figure, at the staring, white face, with a show of interest. "Do you so cherish life, Messer Banda?" he asked, and there was an amiable curiosity in his voice.

Banda grovelled before Cæsar's shoes, pleading: "My lord, my lord, I love life. I have the best cook in Rome; I have a houseful of young girls on the Lateran; my Aventine vineyards yield a wine that is gold and honey. I have never done you any harm, dear lord, never—I swear it. Give me the antidote, for God's mercy! Let me go back to my girls and my wine and my quiet, happy life. The antidote, the antidote!"

Cæsar spoke to him as a physician might to a patient: "Do you feel a numbness in your arms, Messer Banda?"

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"Yes, yes," Banda wailed, between his choking sobs.

Cæsar continued his diagnosis: "And a dull thumping in your forehead?"

"Alas, yes!" Banda answered.

Cæsar surveyed him with an air of admiration. "You drink in the venom very quickly, Messer Banda. But a few drops from this phial would make you as sound and sweet as a ripe apple."

By this time Banda's condition was little less than frantic. "The antidote, give me the antidote!" he cried, and, emboldened by his terrors, he staggered to his feet and strove to grapple with Cæsar and snatch the phial from him. But Cæsar had no more to do than lightly to give him a push and fat Banda fell again sprawling at Cæsar's feet.

Cæsar aired a little commiseration over him. "It seems a pity and a sin to pick you from a life you prize so highly and use so well. Yet am I your heir, and to another that temptation were strong. But Cæsar Borgia is no common man, Messer Banda. See! I would not have you other than alive."

As he spoke he handed the little golden phial to Banda, who grasped it eagerly, lifted it with a trembling hand to his lips, and drained its contents with a sigh of satisfaction. Cæsar watched him sympathetically.

"I think I can tell you how you feel now," he

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said, gravely, aping the manner of a leech. "A delicious coolness seems to pervade your frame."

"Yes," said Banda, with conviction.

"A new vigor pulses in your heart?" Cæsar questioned.

And Banda answered, rapturously, "It does."

Cæsar continued: "The numbness vanishes like magic from your arms?"

Banda answered, "Yes."

"Your temples no longer throb?" Cæsar asked.

Banda answered, "No."

Stooping toward him, Cæsar lifted Banda from his knees and led him to a chair, in which he placed him with careful solicitude. "Come, Messer Banda," he said, "you were my enemy. Your life was in my hands and I gave it back to you. I think you owe me a life."

"A life of devotion, a life of worship—" Banda began.

But Cæsar interrupted him. "A life of service were a better saying," he commented.

Banda spoke eagerly: "Would I could make it an eternity, monsignore."

Cæsar smiled coldly. "A life will suffice. Now, touching these conspirators—"

Banda protested warmly. "I renounce them, monsignore, I renounce them forever."

Cæsar stopped his protestations. "Not at all, excellent friend, not at all. You must denounce

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them, not renounce them. Keep well in with them, keep in the thick of them, be the most hot of all plotters against my poor body—”

Banda protested: “Ah, monsignore!”

Cæsar went on, ignoring his protest: “And then come and tell me all about it and help me hang the rascals. For instance, there is nothing your everyday conspirator dislikes so much as setting his name to paper. You can call noisily for some such pledge of mutual faith; you yourself can sign bravely, conscious of safety. I take it for granted that the others, finding you in this heroic temper, will not be backward. Give me the names, that is all I ask; give me the names. I will be answerable for the gallows, I will be answerable for the axe.”

“You shall have any names I can gather, monsignore,” Banda said, fervently. “I hate the knaves that grumble at your greatness. They think little of my judgment and trust me as little. I know nothing of their plans and purposes, but I’ll learn them if I can. I’ll show the rogues that I am honest.”

Cæsar held out his hand again. “There’s a true friend. Shake hands,” he said, cordially. Then, seeing Banda’s reluctance, he smiled. “Nay, there shall be no ring on my finger,” he declared, and, drawing his ring from his right hand, transferred it to his left. “Farewell.”

“Farewell, my lord,” Banda answered, clasping

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Cæsar's naked hand with confidence, and then, after many obsequious genuflections, he passed from the room.

When he was gone Cæsar seated himself by the great table and laughed softly. Michelotto came forward from the balcony, his face puckered with mirth. Cæsar turned to him. "What a jackass is rascal Banda! It was hard to keep a grave face at the farce."

"There was no poison?" Michelotto asked.

And Cæsar, still laughing, answered, "None—none."

"And the antidote?" Michelotto questioned, his grim face twisted by a growing smile.

Cæsar could scarcely answer for mirth. Liberal in all things, when he laughed he laughed liberally. "Pure water, man, pure water. Yet he gulped it as if it were the elixir of life."

Michelotto chuckled. The jest was after his own heart. "If your lordship were always so humorous," he said, "the population of Rome would be greater."

## IX

“WHY ARE YOU HERE?”

THE curtain of the door was thrown back and a bravo with a face like a Roman centurion put in his head and shoulders and beckoned to Michelotto, who moved toward him. Cæsar, his mirth now mildened to a tranquil smile, went on talking to himself. “We must always temper mercy with justice,” he said. “We have our poison, and we always carry our antidote.” As he spoke he slipped his hand into the bosom of his jerkin and drew out a tiny crystal phial, which he looked at for an instant before consigning it again to its hiding-place. He mused: “We might some day mix a deadly drink for an enemy, and suddenly change our mind and think him better as a friend and wish to save him.”

Michelotto, ending his colloquy with the bravo at the door, turned and came to Cæsar. “The Jew Simeon has brought the woman,” he said.

Cæsar was pleasantly conscious of a slight curiosity concerning this much-praised woman. “Send her in,” he ordered. “I’ll come to her presently.”



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Cæsar rose and went into his own apartment. As one door closed upon Cæsar, Michelotto returned to the other door and introduced Simeon, accompanied by a woman richly dressed and closely veiled. Michelotto expected Simeon to withdraw at once, but, as he lingered, Michelotto turned to the merchant of marble and flesh. "You cannot wait here, Jew," he said, roughly.

Simeon fawned on him almost as obsequiously as he had fawned upon his master a little while before. "I know, I know," he admitted, plaintively. Then he pleaded: "Give me a moment's farewell of my jewel. Proud as I am of my merchandise, my heart aches to part with it."

This show of sentiment over a sordid trade touched the springs of humor in the bravo's nature and won his consent. "Be brisk and brief," Michelotto answered. He moved toward the balcony, and then, stirred by a sudden thought, instantly came back and addressed the Jew again. "By Bacchus, Hebrew, the people throng in the square as thick as flies about blown meat. Did you hear how they talked as you came through the press?"

Simeon spread out his palms deprecatingly and shook his patriarchal head. "Not a syllable, signore," he protested. "I mind my own business. I have no concern with what others say or do."

"Bah!" said Michelotto, contemptuously, and, leaving him, anew resumed his studies of the per-

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turbed piazza, as disdainfully aloof as if he had been staring at the movements of a school of carp in a pool.

Simeon drew his companion to the centre of the great room, saying loudly as he did so, for the benefit of the possibly listening ear, "Dear minion, you are greatly favored of fortune to be allowed to tread the floor of Cæsar." Then, glancing around him furtively, he saw that Michelotto, gazing over the balcony and looking down into the public place, was paying no heed to the Jew and his pupil. In a low tone Simeon whispered to the woman, "Are you ready for the business?"

The woman drew back the veil that concealed her features and showed to her companion the pale, set face of Lavinella. "Quite ready," she answered, in a steady voice.

Simeon continued his whispered instructions hurriedly. "You must tease him to strip off his coat of mail," he urged. "Swear you would never love a man so habited, that the touch of such cold links chills you. At the worst, you must be supple and pliant till time meets desire."

"I will do it quickly," Lavinella said, with an unconquerable shudder of aversion. The pictures of compliance and solicitation that Simeon's words conjured up sickened her.

Simeon sighed. "Heaven grant that he be yielding about his steel tunic," he prayed. Then he

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turned again to the girl and made a stabbing action with his hand, as he asked, "You are sure of the downward stroke to the heart?"

Lavinella answered, firmly, "As sure as Virginius was when he slew Virginia."

Simeon applauded her with soundless meeting of his palms. "Well phrased, well remembered," he murmured. "You shall be more noble than the old Roman." He paused for a moment, then began to counsel anew. "Let your hand bear a little to the right."

Lavinella raised her hand as if to stay further speech. "I need no more schooling," she said, firmly. "My hand will strike like a man's, with the strength of Rome behind it."

Simeon eyed the pale, veiled girl admiringly and would have whispered his admiration, but he was not given the time. Michelotto, turning from the balcony, advanced to the pair. "Now, Jew," he said, roughly, "the jade should know all her cajoling tricks by this time. Teach her no more, and begone, lest I pay your pains by flinging you over the balcony."

Simeon cringed, for he knew that Michelotto would do as he said if the mood took him. "I go, signore, I go," he iterated. Again he turned to Lavinella and addressed her, but this time in a loud, clear voice. "Be worthy of the reputation of your house, child, and the care of your education."

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But Michelotto's scanty patience was exhausted, and he gripped Simeon by the shoulder, shaking him savagely. "Be off!" he commanded, sourly, and Simeon bowed himself out with astonishing alacrity and disappeared from the room, and thereafter, having a care for his skin, from Rome and this record.

Michelotto came down to Lavinella, who had drawn her veil about her face again, and spoke to her warningly. "A word in your ear, mistress," he said, sternly. "Air no vagaries, assume no whimsies. Some of your kind ape the fine lady, play the vaporous, will not do this, will not like that. Be advised; wear no such fashions if you value your hide—be wax in the hands of your master."

Lavinella, standing very still, answered him quietly. "I know how I am to behave."

"It is well," Michelotto said, with a shrug of his shoulders, and then, feeling that he had done all that duty demanded of him, quitted the apartment. He knew that Cæsar would prefer to find the girl alone when he returned to it.

Left to herself, Lavinella plucked away the veil from her face, and then remained standing rigidly where the Jew had left her, with her hands tightly clasped. If she that seemed so calm could have put her troubled thoughts into words they would have run somewhat thus: "I shall be glad when Rome is free and when I can wash my hands, but

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I wish with all my heart and with all my soul that the God of Freedom had found some other servant."

Though she seemed in her anguish to stand so for a long while, she was only alone for a few seconds after the departure of Michelotto. The curtain to Cæsar's private apartments was withdrawn, and Cæsar Borgia entered the room, his eyes fixed with curiosity upon the motionless figure of the girl whose praises had been sounded to him so enthusiastically. At the sound of his footsteps, slight though it was, Lavinella turned her head and confronted the new-comer. To her amazement she gazed upon the face of her lost lover, Alexander, while Cæsar was no less astonished to behold the woman for whom he had searched, for whom he had longed so vainly.

Each cried the other's name — "Alexander!" "Lavinella!"

Then, while Cæsar stood still with a sudden, cruel smile, Lavinella moved to him full of fear. "Why are you here in the house of the tyrant?" she asked, with such an agony of sorrow in her speech as showed the greatness of her love.

Cæsar saw that she was deceived, and left her deceived. "Why," he answered, pleasantly, "though I may not be Cæsar's friend, I am a kind of pet prisoner of his, waiting his patience." His first surprise had passed by now and left him amused at the strange chance, but even while he played with it he

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was still something puzzled and uncertain. "But you?" he asked. "Did you come with Simeon?"

"I did," Lavinella answered.

Cæsar laughed bitterly. He had cherished his idol and resented such unexpected disillusion. "So you are a harlot!" he cried. "Merry Heaven, I took you for an honest piece of inflammable modesty." Then, because she still seemed to him very desirable, the gravity and modesty of her beauty so strangely framed in the flaming garments of a courtesan, he made as if to take her in his arms. "Come," he cried, hotly, "we that are already lovers, shall we forestall Cæsar?"

Lavinella repelled him with a cry of despair. She knew what her lover thought, and her spirit and body were shaken with horror. "Alexander, my beloved, do not wrong me," she entreated, and could say no more for her pain.

Cæsar laughed again. "Wrong you! Why should I wrong you?" he asked, mockingly. "I tender your kind gently. But I must needs grin to think I was so clownishly hoodwinked."

Lavinella protested in an agony. "You were not cheated, Alexander. I am no wanton, though I come here as such."

Cæsar stared at her, at once angry and puzzled by the audacity of her assertion. "No doubt," he said, scornfully, "Simeon keeps a school for modest virgins, does he not?"

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Lavinella spoke swiftly, eagerly, heedless of his taunts, eager to dispel his doubts. "I am here to serve you, to save you," she protested, passionately—"to serve and save every honest Roman who hates the tyrant."

At such words coming from the girl's lips, Cæsar's fierce contempt and angry disappointment were suddenly transmuted to a vivid and amused interest. "How so?" he asked, and watched her, wondering.

Lavinella's immediate answer was to draw a dagger from her bosom and extend it to Cæsar. "I am come here," she said, "love's martyr, to lull this tyrant into the false security of a flattered lust. When he is open to my arms I strike. No man of all the myriad men that hate him can get at him; I as woman and wanton can reach him, please him, deceive him, can strike for the honor of my house, can strike for the freedom of Rome, can strike for your life, beloved!"

Lavinella uttered these words with all the passionate earnestness of a martyr. But Cæsar, his ready sense of humor tickled by the incongruity between the woman's words and the truth of the situation, no longer cared to carry on the deceit. Leaning against the table and clasping its edge with his hands, he gave way to an unrestrained explosion of mirth. The whimsical hideousness of the position pleased him fiercely; so mad a tragedy

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of errors addressed itself irresistibly to his sense of the ludicrous, the ridiculous, the grotesque.

Lavinella stared at him in astonishment while he rocked to and fro, looking at her curiously the while. When he could shake his laughter off and control his mirth sufficiently to allow him to speak, he said, "You are here to kill Cæsar Borgia?"

"Why do you laugh?" Lavinella asked, sadly. Her reason felt numbed by the sudden merriment of her lover; her senses seemed to swim.

Cæsar, still shaking with diversion, emphasized his surprise. "To think that you have come here to kill Cæsar Borgia!" he repeated, and laughed again loud and long.

Lavinella appealed pathetically to his memory. "You said I would make a Judith."

Cæsar paused in his laughter. He thought of the green, moonlit garden and his praises of the heroic maid, and he was entertained beyond phrase at the fantastic fulfilment of his prophecy. "True, I remember," he said.

Lavinella came a little nearer to him, speaking low and fast, with panting bosom. "His enemies are thick in the city," she said. "They swarm in the square. They wait for the signal of the tyrant's death."

Cæsar's face was still amused, but with a graver show of mirth. "Who is to give the signal?" he asked. He was diverted, but also he was



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wary and quick to make the best move in the game.

Lavinella drew herself up. "I will give the signal," she affirmed, proudly.

"And then?" Cæsar asked, quietly.

"Then," Lavinella answered, "Rome will rise; Rome will be free."

Cæsar again was agitated by laughter, even while he made a gesture of applause. "The scheme is keen, well whetted," he protested. "I only see one obstacle to it—one little, trivial, insignificant obstacle."

Lavinella looked at him with surprise. Had any precaution been omitted in the Orsini plan? "What obstacle?" she asked, anxiously.

Cæsar answered her, still speaking very quietly, still smiling, "I am Cæsar Borgia."

Lavinella gazed at him in helpless bewilderment. "What do you say?" she asked, pitifully. Her reeling senses did not realize his words.

Cæsar repeated, as quietly, as smilingly as before, "I am Cæsar Borgia."

Lavinella made a pathetic gesture of appeal. "Why do you mock me, Alexander?" she entreated.

Cæsar grinned at her obstinacy as he called, in a loud voice, "Michelotto!" Then, as the bravo immediately entered the room, he said to him: "The lady denies my identity, disbelieves that I

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am master in this house, master in Rome. Tell her my name."

Michelotto did not in the least understand what was happening, but he obeyed his master passively. Turning to Lavinella, he said, "You are in the presence of the most illustrious Prince Cæsar Borgia."

"Enough," Cæsar commanded, and Michelotto instantly left the room. Cæsar turned to the appalled girl. "Well," he questioned, "do you believe me now, sweetheart?"

The truth overwhelmed Lavinella like a flood. She pressed her hands in horror to her face. "My God, my God, you are Cæsar Borgia!" she murmured.

Cæsar bowed to her in ironical homage. "At your service," he asserted, "and, if you choose, at your mercy. Come, here is my bosom bare to your blade."

As he spoke he advanced, making toward her, and, plucking apart his doublet and the one shirt beneath it, offered her his naked breast. "I am not wearing the famous shirt of steel," he declared; "my naked flesh is patent to your rage. Strike!"

Lavinella shuddered. "I cannot," she moaned, all her world of heroic martyrdom in ruins about her.

Cæsar continued calmly, goading her, taunting her. "All they say of me is true enough. I caused

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your mother's death, I slew your father, I slew your brother. Strike!"

Lavinella, spurred by his words into a spasm of loathing, raised the dagger and made for a moment as if she would indeed be Judith. Then she lowered the weapon to her side with a wail of despair. Her woman's love was greater than her revenge. "I cannot, Alexander!" she moaned.

Cæsar triumphed. "You were not made for Judith, after all. Come to my kisses." He clasped her in his arms as he spoke.

Now a sudden gust of hate and rage stirred her, and she truly tried to stab him; but Cæsar easily plucked the dagger from her nerveless fingers. "Nay, sweeting, nay," he cried, "your chance has gone. We are lovers now."

"Devil!" Lavinella screamed at him, and strove in vain to escape from his embrace.

Cæsar held her in his grasp easily, and, while she struggled, he kissed her passionately upon her beautiful mouth. Then he called again, "Michelotto!" and again Michelotto entered the room.

The bravo observed with absolute unconcern the strange struggle between the girl and his master. It was no business of his, so long as his master did not appear to be in danger.

Cæsar commanded him between the kisses that he showered upon the struggling woman: "Take all my rascals. Cry from the doorway, 'Cæsar is

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slain! Then slay or seize every man that smiles at the tidings."

Michelotto went out, and Cæsar continued his grim wooing of his captive. "Sweet," he whispered, "we shall have a strange wedding—think of it, laugh at it! Judith in the arms of Holofernes."

His mockery stung her like the stroke of a scourge.

"Devil! devil! devil!" she moaned.

Cæsar laughed at her anguish, drank her tears. "Words do not sting, delicious," he said. "You shall love me for myself, I promise you. Cæsar or Alexander, both were great captains. I excel both. Be happy."

At that moment the pair, locked in this terrible embrace, wooing man and wailing woman, heard from below in the piazza the voice of Michelotto proclaiming, "Cæsar is slain!"

Instantly, upon the sound of these words, fierce shouts of joy, of exultation, rose from the assembled people, only to be followed by cries of pain and screams of fear as the rush of Cæsar's people and the fierce clatter of arms told that the slaughter had begun. Shrieks and groans rose from below mingled with the war-cries of Cæsar's followers.

"The game begins!" Cæsar cried, in triumph.

"Devil! devil!" Lavinella cried back at him.

Cæsar mocked her. "You lack variety of speech. I pray you are not always so mannered."

Almost fainting, Lavinella rallied her senses and

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threatened him. "I will kill you yet," she promised.

Cæsar laughed. "As the Roman girl killed Attila, in his sleep? But who could sleep in your company?"

Below, the noise in the piazza grew louder and more terrible, the wails of the wounded, the trampling of flying feet, the howls, the fierce shouts of Borgia's partisans as they struck down their master's enemies, all mingled in a hideous chorus of cruelty and terror. Cæsar wished to see the sport for himself. Dragging the helpless, struggling girl in his arms, he made his way to the window and bent over the balcony, compelling his prisoner to lean over also and look with him at the scene of blood below.

In a loud voice Cæsar flung his defiance to his baffled enemies. "Men of the Orsini, I have your maid!"

Then, while the slaughter of his enemies continued, he turned from the balcony, carrying the fainting girl in his arms, and passed with her into his own apartments.

BOOK III

AN AFTERNOON IN THE LIFE OF CÆSAR  
BORGIA



# I

## HOW MICHELOTTO LEARNED A LESSON

IN one of the higher rooms of Cæsar Borgia's palace Michelotto once was lying very wretchedly on a bed. The room was a small and sordid room enough, a mere kennel in the attics, a singular room, indeed, in contrast with the richness and splendor of those rooms below in which the master of the palace lived and moved magnificently. The bed was small and hard and of little comfort, yet up to that time, or a little before that time, the mean room had seemed as comfortable as need be wished to Michelotto, and the stubborn bed a sufficiently easy couch. Perhaps the chief reason for so much philosophic contentment lay in the fact that Michelotto passed very little of his time in this room. Although Michelotto was of sufficient importance in Cæsar's household, as the captain over all Cæsar's bravos, to be allotted a room, however unattractive to himself, instead of sharing one with half a dozen or more turbulent men-at-arms, his duties, which were many, and his pleasures, which were few, called him so much abroad and kept him



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so hard at work that when he did occupy the room he was well content to fling himself onto the narrow truckle and sleep the sleep of a tired dog.

Now, however, it was different. Now that narrow room and narrow bed had become for days horribly familiar to him, and he cursed the cheerlessness of the walls and the discomfort of the couch in terms of fluent blasphemy and lively obscenity. Indeed, it was a dismal room to be sick in, and Michelotto, at first to his wonder and then to his rage, was very sick indeed. He had been wounded riding and fighting with Cæsar, and, being a tough and valiant ruffian, had paid little heed to his wound and left it little tended, till the wound revenged itself upon Michelotto by tripping him up with a fever and flinging him into the narrow room and onto the narrow bed, to groan with agony, and people the room with the hideous apparitions of delirium, and live or die as he pleased.

Indeed, it was rightly considered a great proof of the kindness of the august master, and the consideration accorded to a valiant captain of braves, that Michelotto lay there at all and was allowed any voice in the matter of living or dying. Had he been no more than an ordinary bravo there would have been no such comfort accorded him, and if he could not have carried his wound carelessly he might have died of it unheeded for all that any one would care. But Michelotto was a

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master bravo, and therefore just worth enough in the eyes of the august master to make it understandable that he should be allowed to have a chance of recovery.

So Michelotto lay on his bed and sweated and struggled with fearful imaginings, and sometimes he was brought food which he could not eat, and once, in the beginning, he was brought some medicine by a heedless leech, who, considering that in doing so much he had done more than his duty, promptly forgot all about him and troubled his feverish slumbers no more. At the outset Michelotto had laughed at his unfamiliar weakness, and had honestly promised himself and believed that he would be up and about again in a day, or a brace of days at the worst, and as busy as ever in Cæsar's service. He was more used to giving wounds, being very skilful with his hands and his weapons, than to receiving them, and such slashes and gashes as he had got in the course of his career had been for the most part insignificant scratches not worth making a face over. But here was this one, delivered by some bungler in a scuffle with no true knowledge of the art and mystery of stabbing, pinning him to his bed, tearing him with thirst, and shaking him with fever.

At first it seemed impossible that he, the active, tireless Michelotto, could be so crippled, and he made, time and again, desperate, pathetic attempts

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to rise, which grew feebler and feebler with each effort, until at last he surrendered at discretion to his relentless enemy and lay on his back gasping, sometimes lucid and defiant, sometimes delirious and profane, but always liable to be consoled, if consolation lay that way, in the thought that no ear was vexed by his defiance or shocked by his profanity. For, indeed, it seemed as if the world of which Michelotto made a part, and, while he could swagger and stab, a not unimportant part, had forgotten him altogether now that he was so useless a piece of goods.

One late day of the long week of sickness, after a period of lucidity, Michelotto lay with closed eyes thinking of many things dully—old pleasures, old adventures, old jests—thinking of one thing clearly, that it was very dismal and disquieting to lie there alone and in pain and in peril. Suddenly he began to fear that he was growing delirious again. He had found a kind of entertainment of late in watching these shifts of consciousness, and trying to see how long he could know that his mind was clear before it drifted into the whirl of fantasy, much as sometimes a lazy sensualist of sleep will seek, comfortably cuddled in the bedclothes, to note the point at which nodding consciousness over-nods and topples into the lubberland of slumber. Although Michelotto felt that his mind was clear at this moment, he fancied that delirium was ap-

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proaching him insidiously, for his strained senses were painfully aware of footsteps coming toward him along the corridor outside. He knew that if they were real footsteps they must be coming toward him, because he knew that there was no one else in any of the rooms belonging to that corridor just then. Those were rooms where other braves, other soldiers slept, and this was daytime and those bravos and those soldiers were abroad and busy and merry, living the proper lives of proper men.

Michelotto felt he must be growing delirious in believing that he heard these footsteps falling lightly along the corridor. He thought so, first of all, because he came to the conclusion that he was quite forgotten, and that no one would ever visit him again; and, secondly, because, in defiance of all probability, the footsteps seemed to be the footsteps of women. Michelotto gave a little groan as he made this observation, for it seemed plain to his troubled senses that the mania had taken him unawares with no hint of its approach, and he was resenting the fact with unreasoning fierceness when the door of his wretched chamber opened and two women entered the room.

Michelotto looked at them for a moment with staring, burning eyes, and then quickly lowered his lids and kept them tightly shut, being convinced now in good earnest that he was very foolish indeed, and drifting rapidly on the way to madness. For

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what he saw or thought he saw was that one of the women was none other than Madonna Lavinella, my Lord of Borgia's leman, and that the other was her favorite waiting-woman, and that Madonna Lavinella looked at him with great kindness, and that her waiting-woman carried a basket on the crook of her plump arm. So Michelotto kept his eyes tightly shut, resolutely battling with phantoms, until he heard his name called in a gentle voice that was so plainly the voice of Madonna Lavinella that he must perforce consent to open his eyes to its sweet entreaty.

When he had opened his eyes he saw that Madonna Lavinella was indeed in the dismal chamber, all exquisite flesh and no vision of sickness, and he saw that her favorite waiting-maid was really with her and that the waiting-maid did carry a basket. And he heaved a great sigh of amazement and wondered what was going to happen next. What did happen next was that Lavinella bent over Michelotto's bed and asked him how he fared in a voice that was full of friendly compassion and sympathy, and sounded sweeter to his weary ears than any music he had ever heard. Michelotto was so astounded by the question, which had never been put to him yet in all the hours and days that he had lain there, and by the astounding condescension which led to such a question being put by so great a lady, that he was at a loss what to answer,

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and, being at a loss, said nothing at all, but only stared.

At this the waiting-woman, whose name was Alda and with whom Michelotto had some slight acquaintance, began to chide him for his churlishness in not answering her lady's question. But Lavinella, restraining her hand-maiden's impetuosity, proceeded still further to perplex and embarrass Michelotto by expressing the hope that he was better, by asking if he was well tended, and by telling him very earnestly how she had only heard by chance of his malady and how he lay in the castle, and how she had come to have news of his health and to be sure that he was fitly looked after. This gracious show of pity, with the gracious deeds that followed it, were as the very miracle of miracles to the sick man, for while Michelotto was putting together such answers as he could to Lavinella's questions, Lavinella's eyes and Lavinella's wit had seen the state of the case, had seen how sick Michelotto was and how uncared for, and how wretched his condition.

So Lavinella, with the aid of Alda her woman, for Lavinella was not unskilled in simple leechcraft, made Michelotto lie more easy in his bed and tended his wound deftly, cleansing it and binding it up afresh. Then Lavinella produced from the basket which Alda carried many rare dainties for a fevered man, for the basket contained cooling

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syrops and ripe fruits and distilled waters and scented essences of sweet herbs wherewith to sprinkle a sick-chamber and sweeten the tainted air. With all these pleasant and precious things Lavinella ministered to Michelotto's misery, soothing him as much with her words as with her deeds, while Michelotto could only marvel and feebly and unavailingly entreat her not to trouble herself about him.

Indeed, it was little less than incredible to the bravo that his master's mistress, who was herself a great lady of an ancient house, should wait upon him with such gentle tenderness and make show of care whether he lived or died. But Lavinella gently laughed aside his protests, insisted upon his taking the simple she had prepared, and when, after a while, the pair of women left him, it was in a cooler, purer atmosphere, with a strange sense of quiet stealing over his vexed body and an unfamiliar reposefulness lulling his vexed mind. He knew that he was blessed with a bed more comfortable to lie on; he knew that a glowing dish of fruits stood beside it, within easy reach of his hot fingers; he knew, with an amazed, bewildering sense of astonishment, that there was one woman in the house of Borgia ready to care for his fate; he knew, too, that his heart was full of a great gratitude to that woman.

On the next day and the next, and for every day

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of the many days through which with infinite pains and efforts Michelotto crawled back to health and strength, Lavinella came with Alda, bringing comfort and courage. Michelotto's case was not, in truth, one that required the aid of any skilled physician or surgeon, and Lavinella had learned enough in the days when she learned so much in the lonely house by the Tiber to enable her to do all that was necessary for the wounded man. But, lest she should by any chance go astray, she persuaded one of Cæsar's learned physicians to visit Michelotto, and the physician had assured her that Michelotto was doing well and needed no more than a little care and nursing. That care and that nursing the bravo got from Lavinella and Alda, her woman, who never failed to visit him at one time or another of the day, and who, as he grew better, would sit by him and read to him to cheer him, till Michelotto began to think himself a child again and listening to fairy tales.

So the days came and the days went, and the wretched room grew in the eyes of Michelotto to have a grace and splendor denied to the halls of princes, for it was so often honored by the presence of Lavinella, and in her absence was so nobly peopled with haunting memories of her beauty and her kindness and the melancholy music of her voice. Up to this time Michelotto had only cared for one person in the world, and that person was



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his master, Cæsar Borgia, whom he admired not merely because he was his master, for Michelotto was no henchman of the doglike type, but because he seemed to Michelotto the greatest noble then living in the world. Michelotto was of gentle birth himself, with a right to coat armor, although his gentility had drifted as low as to the kennel, and though the blazon to which he had a right, and of which he was very proud, was never seen on the coat that carried the red bull on the golden field of Borgia. It was as a great gentleman that he, who was a very humble, fallen one, admired Cæsar Borgia, and he sometimes pleased himself by thinking that if fate had given him the opportunities of Alexander's son, he, Michelotto, might have been some such another man as Cæsar.

Now, however, Michelotto began to find that the narrow range of his devotion included another name, and that name was the name of Madonna Lavinella, of the hostile and hated Orsini house. Michelotto had borne no grudge against Cæsar for leaving him alone in that narrow room to fight his fight with wound and fever. That was the way of great lords, and it had not occurred to him to question it, however much he may have cursed at the discomfort and loneliness and the thirst which were its results. But when Lavinella came to him on her errand of help and pity, with healing ministrations of voice and hand, he began dimly to realize

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that there were words and deeds hitherto wholly meaningless to him that had, after all, a meaning and might on occasion be esteemed. Gentleness, pity, tenderness, compassion; he would have laughed a month ago to think that such words as these had any place, not merely in the vocabulary, but even in the understanding, of a healthy bravo.

Now, thanks to the delicacy of a woman's tending, to the grateful taste of cooling drinks to a fevered palate and the welcome strength of fresh fruit to a weakened frame, Michelotto began to readjust his ideas a little, somewhat awkwardly and roughly indeed, but still with a patience and a perseverance that had its results. For, as he became convinced that what the leech had told him was indeed a fact, and that he owed his life to the timely appearance of Madonna Lavinella in his sick-room, he began to cherish such a glow of gratitude in his heart for her as grew and grew till it became a living and unquenchable flame.

And because it is a familiar truth in the history of the world's way that a little thing may have a great result, seemingly out of all proportion to its beginning, it came to pass that, on a certain summer afternoon in the life of the illustrious Cæsar Borgia, Michelotto had reason to remember very keenly his debt of gratitude to Madonna Lavinella, and to find how eager was his purpose to repay it to the best of his wit.

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Now, if Michelotto, on this summer afternoon, cherished the name of Madonna Lavinella very tenderly in his memory, there was another servant of the illustrious Cæsar Borgia that carried her name in mind, too, though for a very different reason and with a disposition quite unlike. This was Messer Agapito da Amalia, that was Cæsar's secretary by Cæsar's choice and Cæsar's historian by his own inclination.

## II

### IN THE VATICAN GARDENS

**W**ALKING at his ease in the gardens of the Vatican, Messer Agapito reflected with delight on all the wonders of sight and sound, of form and color and music, that made up for him, as for so many others, the glory of the papal court. To him, steeped as he was in all the knowledge and all the traditions of the ancient world that were accessible to his keen mind, his deep erudition, and his insatiable patience, the court of Alexander VI. seemed to represent a regeneration of all that was most beautiful and of all that was most desirable in those ancient radiant days of which he now knew no more than could be afforded by a few priceless parchments, a few scattered images, a few pieces of pottery, and the crumbling ruins of certain antique arches and temples. In the passionate admiration for beauty of line, for comeliness of visage, for grace of limbs, which were characteristic of the great folk about him; in the pompous immodesty which seemed to recognize no laws but those of loveliness; in the enthusiasm which seemed

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ever drunk with desire of fresh and flagrant display of exquisite physical nakedness, Messer Agapito believed that he could indeed realize what Rome had been even while he lived and enjoyed himself in the Rome that was. In the splendid, delicate, shameless entertainments which Alexander VI. gave to his intimates and favorites, making great ambassadors buzz, Messer Agapito basked as a lizard basks in the congenial ferocity of the sun.

That Messer Agapito cared little for women did not seem to matter to him when he was privileged to share in some of the audacious displays of nudity which amused his master's father and his master's sister. He admired such things as he admired his gallery of images, his trays of medals, for the sake of their suavity, their harmony, their rhythmic charm. After all, one understood Catullus, one understood Anacreon better after some show of merry deviltry which delighted great lords and ladies, who piqued themselves upon their passion for the art of Greece and their mastery of the verse of Rome. To take life upon such terms, to think of naked marble as lovelier than naked flesh because it was the more enduring and could be made the more perfect, to regard all forms of passion, of desire, and expressions of desire, as so many interpretations of the ideal religion which all accepted authorities agreed was the exquisite understanding and the unquestioning service of beauty—this to Messer Agapito was to

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do as the wise man should do, and to live truly while the wise man has to live.

Often and often Agapito congratulated himself that the little span of years which to his paganism seemed all that the fates, the stars, the gods had accorded him was given to be passed in such ceaseless possibilities of enjoying the beautiful world that man could make from the imperfect materials offered him by nature. And in this world of his, where he saw everything about him beautiful, from a Latin love-song that Tibullus might have envied to a soldier's breastplate so delicately chased and chiselled that it might have been worthy of Alcibiades, from a red-flowered and red-gowned courtesan as wise as Aspasia to a man of letters like, say, himself, as eloquent as Cicero—in this world of his the fine flower of it all, the royal rose, the man for whose enjoyment and illumination these beautiful possibilities had been brought together to be offered, not as Savonarola sacrifices to an austere folly, but as tributes to an ideal perfection, stood Cæsar Borgia, the perfect man, to be the master of such a paradise.

More than ever Agapito rejoiced in the inspiration that had guided him to write the chronicle of his lord's career, more than ever he exulted in the juxtaposition of such a hero and such an historian. It was good to think of the great work he had created and was cherishing of all those closely

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written pages piled together in their proper arrangement of books and chapters, consecrating in a Latin as monumental and logical as the best of the republic a demigod more splendid than the best of the emperors.

Messer Agapito's chronicle had, indeed, swelled to colossal proportions of late years. As he strolled there, sunning himself in that noble and fragrant garden on that sultry summer afternoon, his mind lingered lovingly over the rush of great events it had been his privilege to record on his roll of Borgia's fame. He thought of the splendid embassy to France, when Borgia rode with more than regal splendor to be the guest of the French monarch, carrying with him that papal privilege of divorce which was to allow Louis XII. liberty to wed to his infinite advantage, and which was to be rewarded by the bestowal of the hand of the daughter of France upon Cæsar. He filled sheet after sheet with accounts of Cæsar's entrance to this town or departure from that town, with long lists of the pages that preceded him, of the pages that followed him, coupled with descriptions of the costly garments that they wore. He rejoiced to record that the train of attendant mules which bore Cæsar's baggage went shod with gold, in proof that Cæsar, greater than all kings, used for the shoeing of his steeds the precious metal that most monarchs reserved for the adornment of their foreheads. He

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recorded Cæsar's conquests in a flowing prose that remained supple in spite of the countless technicalities of military science, which Messer Agapito was delighted to show that he had, like those of all other forms of human knowledge, at his fingers' ends.

That Cæsar's marriage was an unhappy one for the lady did not concern Messer Agapito in the least; all he thought of was that it was an honor rightly accorded to his illustrious master. He thought, too, with a pleased smile, of Cæsar riding side by side with the twelfth Louis on his Italian expedition, and he exulted over the magnificent appearance of the Borgian prince as contrasted with that of the unattractive French sovereign. He recalled the swift and brilliant campaigns of Cæsar in the Romagna, which, after a series of feats of arms that, according to him, had never been rivalled in ancient times by any of the great captains of the past, resulted in the subjugation of so many hostile cities and mutinous princes to the authority of the Ruddy Bull. He remembered, too, and applauded the master-stroke of trickery by which Cæsar, being crossed in his purposes by certain of his own allies and subordinates, obtained possession very treacherously of the person of those allies and subordinates and incontinently put them to death. Truly, those three past years had been busy years, fruitful years, glorious years. Yet through them all Messer Agapito remembered, and



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not without a twinge of impatience, that he was unable to avoid associating those brilliant incidents in Cæsar's career with things so trivial and unimportant as the face, the name of a woman.

Though we know that Messer Agapito was somewhat indifferent to women, he was too wise a critic of life to blame or marvel at others for not sharing his indifference. It was fitting that great princes and great captains should take a pleasure in the company of beautiful women; their presence in his neighborhood adorned such a man like the laurels of his chaplet or the jewels on his hands. They were exquisite amusements, necessary relaxations to soldiers and statesmen, that changed the face of empires with their brains and deposed monarchs with their swords. Such pastime was as it should be; it was proper that the illustrious Cæsar Borgia should take his lion's share of it. Agapito had nothing but approval for the multitude of Cæsar's loves; they made a brave background for his pageant as of woven tapestry; he applauded all the women, save one woman.

It was the existence of this woman that worried Messer Agapito. He could keep her out of his chronicle, and did, as all the world knows, to the end, but he could not, for all his endeavor, keep her out of his mind. Through all Cæsar's glorious ascent up the wide steps of the Temple of Fame this woman was ceaselessly in Cæsar's train; in

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every scene of Cæsar's life this woman was permitted to be present, though always, indeed, in the shadow. Messer Agapito, that cared little for women, could not understand it, could not explain it, and he was, like most men of his kind who, when they meet with a thing that they cannot understand or explain, are annoyed with it. She was a beautiful woman; he admitted that readily enough, for it was not his business as a curious connoisseur of the antique and an authority upon art to deny loveliness even in an existing creature. The world of such a man as Cæsar was full of comely women; even his wife was not unprepossessing, and his varied range of mistresses seemed like a living rainbow that displayed and shaded all the possible types of feminine grace. But while Cæsar cared nothing for his wife, and but little for the ruck of his mistresses, each of whose existence with him was as ephemeral as that of a midge, this vexatious woman remained always in his household and often in his neighborhood. When Cæsar journeyed she sometimes journeyed with him. When Cæsar was at home she was an ornament of his house, an ornament, indeed, that was somewhat shut apart, to be produced when it pleased the master to feast his eyes upon it or to play with it, but still there, perpetually there.

Messer Agapito could only conclude that whatever abiding charm the woman might and indeed

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must possess for Cæsar lay in the fact that she was of kin to the Orsini, and that for their own reasons the Orsini were very keen to have her in their hands again. Once, and indeed twice to Agapito's knowledge, the Orsini had made futile attempts to kidnap the lady, which had ended disastrously for themselves. It might be, he reasoned, that Cæsar found so vehement a zest in the thought that somebody wanted his minion as was potent enough to inspire him with an abiding diversion, if not with an abiding desire. There was the fact to be faced—Cæsar had made Monna Lavinella his own after his direct way some three years ago, when he stood, as it were, on the very edge and threshold of splendid adventures. Now here at this later day, when Cæsar was, if not the ruler of the world, at least the ruler of the Romagna, which was the choicest portion of the world, still this lady lingered in the vicinity of his glorious victories, always soft, almost servile, a beautiful wild beast that had after some fashion or other, whether by starvation or stripes or white-hot irons, been thoroughly tamed.

Messer Agapito, admitting amiably enough his own indifference to womankind, recognized that there might be charms in Monna Lavinella which he was not able properly to appreciate, but he was inclined to adhere to his conviction that the secret of her charm lay in the fact that she was the fair

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flower of a hostile house, and that it had been in the beginning her mission to kill Cæsar. Messer Agapito knew it was Cæsar's way when he honored Madonna Lavinella with his dalliance to leave ostentatiously about the room sharp, naked daggers and unsheathed, trenchant swords, and other like easy ministers of sudden death, and, as it were, to taunt his paramour with the presence of these glittering reminders of the deed which she had been sent to do and which she had not done. There again Messer Agapito faced a crux. A single woman had slain a great captain ere this. What of Judith and Holofernes? What of the Roman girl and Attila? It had been easier a thousand times for Madonna Lavinella to murder Cæsar if she had the mind ripe and the hand ready, and Cæsar still lived and found frequent entertainment in thus playing with fire. It must be that Madonna Lavinella, in spite of herself, loved her master, that having once been forced to give him her body, the gift of her soul had somehow or other gone along with the bargain; that as she had loved the illustrious Cæsar when she thought him no more than a poor clerk—for Messer Agapito knew the story of the wooing—so she was, as it were, compelled by fate, willy-nilly, to love him, though she knew him to be not merely her ravisher but the butcher of her kin. Such things may be, Messer Agapito asserted, nodding his head wisely over the prob-

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lem, and for once, in a way, Messer Agapito was right.

Over such thoughts Messer Agapito mused, brooded, ruminated, walking there in the papal gardens and waiting attendance upon a great event. He was so concerned with great events since ever he had known Cæsar that he resented any concern with things that he considered petty and trivial. Such, for instance, was Cæsar's incomprehensible persistence in companionship with Madonna Lavinella; such was Cæsar's extravagant desire for some statue in the keeping of an exiled Orsini which Ugo da Rovere had tried to obtain for Cæsar this three years back and had failed in the trial; such was Cæsar's extravagant gratification when, after three years, another hand and mind had helped to mend Ugo's failure; such was Madonna Lavinella's kindness to Michelotto when Michelotto was sick of his hurt, though he gave this little consideration beyond a certain ironic amusement at the thought of the daughter of the Orsini and a mistress of a Borgia playing sick-nurse at the bedside of a ruffian in fever. It was not given him to conceive that any consequence of moment to a mighty prince could possibly depend upon those visits and Madonna Lavinella's friendliness to a dilapidated bravo. Michelotto had been sound and solid enough this many a day, and as reliable in Cæsar's service as ever, for which in a vague way so much thanks was

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due to my Lady Lavinella. But Agapito, who cared nothing and less than nothing for Lavinella, and almost nothing for Michelotto, would far sooner that Michelotto had died the death than that Lavinella had ever existed to tend him into health and to trouble his, Agapito's, estimate of his master and hero.

Thus Agapito, on this heavy afternoon of summer, walked and mused in the papal gardens, reflecting sourly upon Madonna Lavinella, and wishing very ironically that the devil had her; thus Michelotto, on this heavy afternoon of summer, walked and mused in the papal gardens, thinking much, for his part, of Monna Lavinella. For the day was heavy in the very rage of its heat, and under the dull blue of the burning sky that threatened thunder the very air in all the fragranciness of the garden's odors seemed feverish, reminding Michelotto of those hours and days not so long ago when Madonna Lavinella was good to him in his trouble. And so these two men, Cæsar's bravo and Cæsar's secretary, each on that glowing afternoon, thinking much of one woman, though with very different thoughts, were destined to meet and clash, with strange results.

### III

#### A FEAST FOR AN ENEMY

THE gardens of the Vatican were very beautiful, the pride of the Spaniard Pontiff as they had been the pride of many pontiffs, his predecessors, and Alexander Borgia had devoted much time, much thought, and much money to their embellishment. Their extent was so great and their cultivation so varied, that, if it had pleased him never to stir foot from his own special dominion of the Vatican, he would still have found in those fair and amiable spaces a little kingdom of ever-changing but ever-abiding beauty in which to take his ease. For the hour, indeed, on that afternoon of heavy heat when Agapito walked and mused among the flowers, Alexander Borgia was confined within a closer compass than the gardens of the Vatican. The walls of the palace enclosed him, and his physicians denied him egress, for he was suffering, though only suffering slightly, from illness. He had caught a chill some days previously, and while the indisposition was regarded as no more than trifling, still those about him deemed it advisable that his holiness

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should run no risks—more especially his son Cæsar, whose solicitude for his father's health was always conspicuous and always justified in his own eyes by his policy.

But if the pleasures of the gardens of the Vatican were denied for a time to Alexander Borgia, they were free to Cæsar Borgia, and Cæsar had need of them for a special purpose. To Cæsar's mind, so quick to love all beauty that could stir and soothe the senses, there was one spot of the Vatican gardens that was more lovely than all the others. Although it was but little removed from the Vatican itself, it was so bowered about by trees, and so cunningly contrived to take advantage of slight slopes and miniature valleys presented by the ground, that within its precincts no part of the papal palace was visible, and the sojourner might well believe himself to be in the heart of the Roman country. A portion of this little paradise within a paradise had been set apart for a vineyard, whose trellised rows of spreading leaves and twisting branches rested the eye and tempted the imagination. For that vineyard produced yearly a certain small return of a wine of a very peculiar sweetness and richness and headiness, the like of which, those that grew it declared, was not to be found in any part of Italy. It seemed, indeed, as Cæsar would sometimes suggest to those that were permitted to savor its fragrance, as if all the long-inherited wealth of the papacy had



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in some strange and spiritual way enriched the soil so that the vines which sprang from it carried in their sap and conveyed to their clusters a color and a glory and a charm as unparalleled as the magnificence of the papacy itself.

Hard by this vineyard ran a marble terrace commanding a noble view of the spreading Roman country, and at one end of this terrace Cæsar Borgia had caused to be built a small marble temple enshrining an altar to the ancient tutelary deity of Rome, which had been dug up in the course of the excavations for the terrace. In the shelter of this temple, in the stormiest days of late autumn and middle winter, it was possible to sit in comfort and to survey at ease the surrounding landscape, scarcely less lovely, in its autumnal trappings or its rare winter wear of snow, than in its fairest dawn of spring or prime of summer.

In this happy spot, on this momentous day, a number of servants wearing the Borgia livery and bearing the badge of the Borgia bull were spreading a table on the edge of the vineyard facing the terrace, a pleasing situation for a feast, and agreeably sheltered from the sun by the shade of the lofty trees. The table was set for two guests only, but from the magnificence of the gold plate which covered the board—cups and ewers and pitchers and dishes which came from the proudest treasures of the papal household—it was plain that the host re-

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garded his guest as a man to be entertained with the utmost honor and magnificence. Indeed, this was the case, for the guest was none other than his eminence the Cardinal Rovere, whom at last, after many unsuccessful endeavors, Cæsar had persuaded to visit him at the Vatican and meet him at a feast. It was scarcely strange, as even Agapito admitted to himself, that Cardinal Rovere should be somewhat reluctant to accept the hospitality of Cæsar Borgia. Rovere knew very well, for all that he made so many outward protestations of modesty and humility, that he was the one man left, after the long series of Cæsar's triumphs and successes, whom Cæsar had any reason to regard as a serious or even a possible obstacle to his ambition. What Rovere could not guess with any certitude was whether Cæsar himself had any real knowledge of the craft and the ability which lay beneath the mask of Rovere's easy-going self-abnegation. But in all cases of uncertainty it pleased Rovere best to be on the safe side, and safety seemed to dwell very patently outside the boundaries of the Vatican or any other place where Cæsar held dominion. But at last Cæsar had found a way to persuade the coy Rovere to accept his hospitality.

The failure of Messer Ugo's mission to Genoa only whetting Cæsar's appetite for the statue, had caused him, in this leisure from great wars, to despatch a better ambassador to Genoa, none other

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than Messer Leonardo da Vinci himself, and Messer Leonardo, having seen the marvel that dwelt in Genoa, had been as eager as his patron to see it transferred to Rome, and had striven with greater eloquence and greater authority than Messer Ugo could command to persuade its owner to part with his treasure. So far Messer Leonardo had not succeeded altogether, but at least he had gained something as the fruit of his pilgrimage. He had obtained permission to take with his own hands a cast of the precious statue, and this cast had been conveyed, under his care and at infinite pains, to Rome, and had been set up under his instructions in the little temple on the vineyard terrace, having for its pedestal the ancient altar of the tutelary deity of Rome.

Now, when Cæsar saw this shadow of a statue in its place, and became aware of the loveliness of its lines, the perfection of its proportions, the grace of its poise, the beauty of its face, his longing to possess the original increased a hundredfold, a thousandfold, increased beyond all limitation of terms of desire. When, therefore, Leonardo told him that the exile in Marseilles was sending a special messenger to treat with Cæsar personally for the possible sale of the statue, Cæsar swore to himself a mighty oath that the statue should be his, let it cost him what it might. But while Cæsar's desire thus sighed for the substance, his cunning saw in the

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shadow a wonderful bait for a mouse-trap. If there was one man in Rome who loved statues almost as much as Cæsar did, it was the Cardinal Rovere, whose passion it was to enrich his palace with the treasures of the ancient world, and whose only presumption, as it seemed, was to profess great critical and artistic knowledge of such comely things.

No sooner, therefore, was the copy of the statue safely installed in its new temple than Cæsar hastened well-accredited messengers to Rovere telling him that he had a wonderful and perfect image from the ancient world to show him, and begging his presence at breakfast that he and Cæsar, as brother connoisseurs, might enjoy the contemplation of its beauty together. Cæsar cheerfully admitted that political differences might keep men apart who should in their nature be friends, but he argued that in the kingdoms of art they should find a neutral ground wherein to meet happily and be brothers. And Rovere, tempted by the only lure that could draw him to the Vatican, consented to accept Cæsar's invitation. He consented, indeed, under conditions prompted by his caution that might have given offence to Cæsar, had Cæsar not been resolved in this instance to take no offence so long as he could attain his purpose. Once let him get Rovere to sit at wine with him, and Cæsar's only possible obstacle would speedily be out of the way. So Rovere was coming to the Vatican that morning,

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with a little army at his heels by way of retinue, and for the purpose of his entertainment the table was being spread in Cæsar's vineyard.

The care of the circumstances of the feast had been intrusted, not to the ordinary officers of the Vatican, but to Michelotto, and to Michelotto alone—to Michelotto, who, besides being Cæsar's favorite bravo, was used by Cæsar in all affairs which needed a special confidence and trust. And Michelotto, though he had not been directly told of Cæsar's purpose, could make a pretty shrewd guess as to what was toward, and so guessing enjoyed the prospect of the afternoon's plot amazingly, and was delighted to be his master's helping hand in the strange business. So Michelotto stood over the servants as they spread the board, directing them how to display the great gold plate and dishes and cups and vases to the best advantage on the white linen, and how to place the table so that, no matter how long the revellers might choose to continue the feast, the battle-ground of their appetites should always remain cool in a kindly and a fragrant shade. It had been arranged between Cæsar and his follower that none of the servants of the Vatican should be present at the interview between Rovere and himself. Michelotto alone, with the aid of two pages as cup-bearers, was to wait upon the illustrious feasters, taste their meats, and help them to the choicest morsels. In accordance, however, with Ro-

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vere's stipulations, made, indeed, under the colorable pretence of Rovere's delicate health and a need for the immediate presence of his personal attendants, a number of Rovere's people—and these would be secretly armed under their seeming peaceful coats—were to wait at hand, under the command of Nephew Ugo, out of sight, though close at call, during the progress of the banquet.

The last touches had now been given to the board. All was ready for the honorable master of the house and his honorable guest, and Michelotto surveyed with a pleased eye the preparations for their entertainment, and applauded himself for his share in their success. He had dismissed the servants, and stood now on the edge of sunlight and shadow looking at the glow of gold and the gleam of glass and the rich color of piled fruits and scattered flowers, with something of the same satisfaction that a lover of the fine arts would have displayed in gazing upon one of Messer Leonardo's canvases. Suddenly his self-satisfied enthusiasm was interrupted by the arrival of Messer Agapito da Amalia, who came slowly toward him down the pergola that conducted to the nearest entrance of the Vatican. Agapito gave a brief glance, condescendingly approving, at Michelotto's work.

"Is all prepared?" he asked, affably. He was always amiable in his bearing toward Cæsar's bloodman, though in his heart he disliked and despised him.

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Michelotto made a significant gesture with his hand toward the splendidly spread board, as if to say, This picture answers for itself. "The table woos the guests," he declared, proudly.

Agapito smiled at his enthusiasm, as one that deals kindly with a child. "I came," he said, "to make sure that everything was in readiness. I expect his eminence here in a few minutes, and am myself to conduct him to Cæsar, who will receive him in this spot. The illustrious Cæsar thinks that in consequence of the slight indisposition of his holiness he can offer his guest a more cheerful welcome here than in the palace."

Michelotto smiled wisely. "It is pleasant to see two such great men become such friends," he said. The words were simple, if Michelotto's thoughts were not so, but Agapito, looking shrewdly on the bravo's face, saw nothing patent there but a straightforward simplicity.

"It is a good thing for the Cardinal," said Agapito, thoughtfully, "that Cæsar is so willing to make friends. Cæsar is strong enough now to crush Rovere if he made any sign of being Cæsar's enemy. But, indeed, the good man makes no such sign, and, indeed, I think the good man has no keen desire to feel Cæsar's heel upon his neck."

Michelotto hazarded a question, not that he cared much for Agapito's opinion, but because he felt that it became his gentility to show himself at ease. "In

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what regard do you think Cæsar holds Rovere?" he asked.

Agapito shrugged his shoulders. "I think Rovere wearies Cæsar prodigiously, because he is tired of his persistence in existing, very much as Madonna Lavinella wearies Cæsar."

Michelotto gave an angry start. "That is not possible," he said.

Agapito stared at him, amazed at his manner. "What is not possible?" he questioned, blandly.

Michelotto answered, "That Cæsar should weary of Madonna Lavinella."

Agapito laughed heartily. "Man, man," he said, "do you know so little of the Borgia? Cæsar would weary heartily of Lady Venus herself if she were so unwise as to overstay her welcome or vex his humor in any way. No woman ever yet held Cæsar long, or ever will, and the women are wise who know that betimes and fill their pockets and say their good-byes before Cæsar stifles his first yawn in their faces."

Michelotto shook his head. "Madonna Lavinella is not like other women," he protested, vehemently. "Cæsar could not weary of her."

Agapito looked at him indulgently. "You are a good fellow," he said, "but you do not know Cæsar as I do. I am an historian. I am a statesman. I can gauge men. Cutting throats is your trade, not



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gauging the nature of Cæsars. Keep to your last, cobbler."

Michelotto frowned sourly. "I am not ashamed," he said, "to serve Cæsar and shield Cæsar with my dagger, but I would have you know, Master Scribe, that I am no common bravo, no fellow plucked from the gutter to push a knife. I have gentility; I have a coat of arms as brave in its way as the red bull on the yellow field. And I have some tincture of scholarship, too, to enrich my gentility."

Agapito was amused, as he always was when Michelotto asserted his claims to recognition as one of gentle birth. "I pray the gods," he said, "to keep your gentility green."

He meant to be politely impertinent, but Michelotto hardly heeded him; he was thinking of the secretary's earlier words.

"She is far too fair," he said, doggedly, "to weary any man."

Agapito yawned. "She is certainly a comely piece of flesh," he admitted. "I do not greatly care for women," he confessed, after a brief pause.

Michelotto, not heeding him, went on speaking his thoughts. "If I were Cæsar," he said, "I would give up Rome, I would give up Italy, I would give up the round world, if I ruled it, to be the lover of Madonna Lavinella."

Agapito gave a little cry of unfeigned horror at such blasphemous discourse. "The gods be

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praised," he cried, "that you are not Cæsar Borgia! It would be a bad day for Italy if Cæsar set the smiles of a light o' love above the imperial crown. What is the matter with you, man, that you babble such madness?"

"I should be a madman indeed," Michelotto answered, gloomily, "if I thought other thoughts. When I lay ill with my wound, that time you know of, and sick with fever, and there seemed to be no soul on earth to care whether I lived or died, Madonna Lavinella came to my poor room and sat by my truckle-bed, and brought me cooling drinks and wholesome distillations and flowers, and kind words that were better than all besides. She saw in me something more than the wounded, useless ruffian flung aside to die. She saw in me a fellow-mortal, one that was, however distantly, of her humanity, one that needed help, which she gave with a full heart and a free hand. I am very grateful for her kindness."

Agapito cackled laughter. "Perhaps," he said, when he had made an end of his mirth, "if you were to ask Cæsar very prettily he would yield the lady to you when he was quite weary of her."

Michelotto, who had been glaring at him while he made merry, now blazed into a great rage. "Master Scribe," he said, savagely, "I will jab my dagger in your throat if you dare to word one foul thought of her."

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Agapito drew back from the angry bravo with a pretence of alarm that was not wholly pretence, for the expression of Michelotto's face was so menacing that it might have alarmed a man more habituated to personal encounters than the learned secretary. One hand of Michelotto's gripped him by the shoulder, while the other closed tightly on the handle of his dagger. Messer Agapito was a courageous man enough for one that was unfamiliar with action, but he had no mind to risk his breath in a personal struggle with a younger, stronger man who was skilled in the use of weapons. There were better things to do with his body than to make it a target for the dagger-strokes of a madman, as indeed for the moment he conceived Michelotto to be. So, without losing his composure, he addressed Michelotto in a bantering tone. "Heaven and earth, man," he cried, "how can so great a flame grow from so small a spark! Your black frown frightens me, I assure you. It must be your gentility that makes you so chivalrously suspicious, for I protest I spoke no word against the lady."

Now Michelotto, the first flush of his rage abated, felt that he had gone somewhat too far in his wrath, and he was not unready to accept the secretary's apologies. It was not in the interest of Cæsar that two men so serviceable to him as his bravo and his scribe should be in antagonism, so he growled a thought less loudly, and he glared a thought less

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ferociously, as, with his one hand still on Agapito's shoulder and the other still clutching at his dagger, he warned him to be wise betimes and remember that the Lady Lavinella was a lady to be revered. With the which Agapito heartily agreed, cordially promising to bear the fact in mind, and at this moment he was pleased to welcome an interruption to his colloquy with the bravo.

## IV

### THE BEDEVILMENT OF MESSER BANDA

NOW, while Michelotto and Agapito were thus at grips brawling over Madonna Lavinella, as, so Agapito afterward phrased it, the Greeks and Trojans battled over the body of Patroclus—this in his private diary and not in the great chronicle—their squabble was suddenly, and perhaps for Messer Agapito fortunately, interrupted. There showed a glitter of colored silks through the trees, and then a portly gentleman came tripping mincingly down the pergola, who gained the open space where Michelotto and Agapito clutched snarling, and stared at them in amazement with uplifted, plump, white hands that glittered with rings. This newcomer, that had so jolly a florid face and was so foppishly attired, was none other than Messer Banda Bentivoglio, who had received a hint brimmed with significance from Michelotto himself that it might be well for him to pay his homage to Cæsar a thought more assiduously, even if in so doing he neglected his vineyards and his girls and his boon companions. So Messer Banda, thus

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warned, came with all speed to pay his respects to Cæsar, and, being by Cæsar's august permission free of entry to him wherever he might chance to be, at his own palace or at the Vatican, he had been permitted unquestioned to enter the gardens, where he was told that he would shortly find Cæsar. He had come down the pergola full of good-humor with himself and with the world, but his self-content received a sudden shock when he found Cæsar's bravo and Cæsar's secretary with their hands upon each other, and Michelotto's face red with sudden rage and Agapito's face pale with sudden fear, and the two men's eyes shining with hatred. After the first glance Messer Banda took it that he must be witnessing some kind of sport or pastime unfamiliar to him, for though he realized clearly enough that any ordinary Roman might hate another Roman to the death, it had not occurred to him that there could be any possibility of quarrel between two members of an establishment so well ordered and controlled as Cæsar's household.

"Pleasant sirs," he cried, in the full voice of well-fed humanity, "what is your humor?" For, indeed, it astonished Messer Banda not a little to see Cæsar's secretary and Cæsar's chief bravo as it were within an inch of fisticuffs.

Michelotto, feeling that he had been foolish in his heat, turned away from Agapito, and Agapito, while he plumed himself like a ruffled bird, smiled

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with the gayest, most careless air in the world. "Here was a big brawl," he explained, addressing Messer Banda, "blown from a little word." He glanced at Michelotto good-humoredly. "This honest fellow ruffians me because I have been venturesome enough to suggest that our great master, Cæsar Borgia, begins to weary a little of Madonna Lavinella."

Banda turned his smooth, plump face full on Michelotto, and his little porcine eyes twinkled with amusement. His amusement, however, was not at the fact of their quarrelling so much as at the thought of their quarrelling over a thing so well known. "Why," he cried, with the astonishment of one that asserts a well-known fact, "of course he tires of her stale graces."

Michelotto looked suddenly round at him with the snarl of a snapping wolf, and cried "Liar!" so savagely that Banda, terrified, recoiled from him, bubbling with protestations, his words stumbling over one another headlong as he spoke.

"No offence," he cried, eagerly—"no offence. I am giving no opinion of my own—far from it. I am merely echoing heedlessly the common talk of Rome, which asserts that Cæsar only keeps the lady by his side because of some dream or prophecy, or such-like wizardry, that her companionship brings him fortune."

Michelotto was silent.

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Agapito shrugged his shoulders, disdainful of this explanation of his master's conduct. "Cæsar holds Italy in the hollow of his hand," he said; "he is his own good-fortune."

Banda took no heed of Agapito's comment, but went on cheerfully, deeply interested himself, and completely indifferent to all other persons. "For myself," he declared, "I hazard no opinion on the matter. I am glad to believe that Cæsar never tires of Madonna Lavinella. Why should he? I am glad to believe that Cæsar never tires of me. Whenever he has a breathing-space from his great campaigns he sends for me and questions me about my health as lovingly as if I were a brother"—here he coughed, remembering the rumors and beliefs as to the fate of Gandia, and added, hurriedly—"as if I were a well-beloved brother."

Agapito yawned a little behind his fine fingers, for the fat fellow's arrogance wearied him. He did not stay to hear more of his prattle, but strolled toward the terrace.

Michelotto, however, more interested in the new arrival, came close to Banda, plucked him by the sleeve, and whispered in his ear. He had business to transact with Banda, business inspired by Cæsar.

"These same campaigns," he said, meaningly, referring to the words Banda had used a moment before, "cost Cæsar much money. Of course, Cæsar is rich, but if he were Croesus himself he could



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scarcely stand the strain of these wars. Men to pay, arms to find, one way or another there is never an end to the outlay." He tapped Banda significantly upon the breast. "It were a brother's part," he said, confidentially, "to pour some gold into Cæsar's overbled exchequer."

At the word "gold" Banda shuddered, and he held up his hands again. It was his favorite gesture, because it pleased him to see how plump and well kept they were, and how honorably suggestive of a well-fed gentleman. "Gold," he echoed, and edged away from Michelotto. He went on to protest volubly, bubbling with words. "I have no gold. All the fortune that I have is vastly overrated, and, such as it is, it is wholly sunk in land. As I am a Christian man and a Roman citizen, I have no more than daily spending-money to call my own, believe me. If I had gold I would gladly give to Cæsar." He paused and spread out his hands with a native gesture. Michelotto, however, taking, or pretending to take, his pause as a kind of promise, clapped him lustily on the back, and Banda winced under the tribute of the bravo's heavy hand.

"Why, that is bravely said," Michelotto cried, and might have said more; but Banda hastily interrupted him, speedy to correct any false impression.

"I have no gold," he declared, "and so cannot lend to Cæsar."

Now Michelotto did not really care whether

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Banda promised aid to Cæsar or refused it, for he knew very well that if Cæsar wanted anything from Banda he would take very good care to get it; but he frowned angrily at the fat man, who gaped back foolishly at him.

As the two men stood staring at each other, Agapito came hurriedly down the terrace and beckoned to Michelotto. "Here she comes," he whispered, suavely, with an ironical smile — "your matchless Lavinella. I will take Messer Banda off your hands for a while." He turned to Banda as he spoke and took him by the elbow. "Come with me, Messer Banda," he said; "let us take the air together and feast our gaze on Cæsar's latest treasure." Thus talking, Agapito drew Banda toward the terrace and came to a halt by the temple. In obedience to a gesture of the secretary, Banda entered the shrine, closely followed by Agapito, who pointed to the statue it contained.

"How do you like the image?" he asked.

And Banda, gazing and gloating, answered, "It is divine."

Then they came out of the temple together and walked in the vineyard, and Messer Banda talked learnedly about wine.

Now, while they were thus engaged, Lavinella came down the pergola and entered the open space. She was splendidly habited, as became a great lady and the mistress of Cæsar, but the rich trappings

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were a gaudy garnish to a sad face. Michelotto turned and saluted her.

"Madonna Lavinella," he said, with a respect in his voice that would have sounded strange to those who knew him and his manner of carriage and language best.

Lavinella paused. "I fear you are busy," she said.

Michelotto shook his head. "Never too busy to welcome divinity," he said, in a fashion that he hoped was consonant with the tradition of his rusty gentility.

Since he had made the acquaintance of Lavinella he had furbished up his meagre scholarship, that he might exchange speech with her in a becoming fashion.

Lavinella laughed lightly, but her voice was weary as she answered, "I fear a somewhat dishevelled, discredited Olympian, Messer Michelotto."

Michelotto made her as graceful a bow as he could accomplish. "I worship at your shrine," he asserted, warmly.

Lavinella laughed again, and the laugh was more bitter than sweet. "Then, between much of your kindness and a little of your friendship, you may do me a service. What is happening here to-day?"

Michelotto stared at her. "Do you not know?" he asked.

Lavinella shook her head. "Cæsar tells me nothing."

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Michelotto explained. "The ever-illustrious Cæsar Borgia greets to friendly feast the ever-honorable Cardinal Rovere."

Lavinella felt and looked surprised. "To what end?" she questioned. "I thought the Cardinal had always refused when Cæsar would have welcomed him to be his guest, fearing some treason."

It was now Michelotto's turn to laugh. "The old fox has kept aloof long enough," he said, "in spite of Cæsar's temptings, but at last Cæsar has found a bait that takes him. He has got some statue somewhere, some old piece of paganism, which those that prize such parodies of life love to spend hours in gaping at that might be better spent about some manly business, and it seems that the chance of a sight of this statue draws our red reynard from his den."

Lavinella looked thoughtful. "I remember," she said, "that Cæsar said something of a statue in Genoa which he desired to have, but, as I remember, he could not persuade its owner to part with it, though, as I think, he sent Messer Leonardo himself to be his ambassador."

Michelotto shrugged his shoulders. "I know nothing of that. One such toy is as much good as another for me. All I know is that there is some statue here, and that it stands in that temple yonder."

"If it is there," said Lavinella, "I will look at

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it," and, gathering up her heavy, brocaded skirts with both her hands, she ascended the terrace steps and passed into the temple. She was only there for a few moments; then she came out again and descended the steps. "There is a woman's image in the temple," she said to Michelotto, "and it is very beautiful — beautiful enough to tempt even Cardinal Rovere to come and see it—but it is not a statue. It is only a plaster cast of a statue. The original must be of priceless worth, for it seems to be as perfect as when the Greek fingers left it."

"I do not know what it is," Michelotto answered, "and, saving your presence, I may say that I do not very greatly care, but I am grateful to it, since it has had the power to bring Rovere here, for he and Cæsar can seize upon the opportunity to sign and seal a peace between two powers."

Lavinella frowned slightly. "Is this power worth the pains?" she asked, doubtfully.

"Yes, indeed," Michelotto answered, emphatically. "Rovere is a strong man, though you might not think it to look at him, with his bowings and scrapings and his putting ugly things by. He is, as I take it, the only man left in Rome who has it any wise in his power to be at all troublesome to Cæsar. All the rest Cæsar has kicked out, clapped into prison here, beheaded there, scattered like mice. But this smug, demure Cardinal, whose name never gets into any list of conspirators, who seems

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to take no sides and play no part in the game, is more dangerous than he looks, and might be more dangerous still if time and chance afforded him the cue. Oh, have my word for it, red-fox Rovere is a strong man, and if I were Cæsar I would take a short way with him." He coughed a little, suddenly uncertain whether he had gone too far or not, and then added, apologetically, "Lady, you are the power behind the throne, and therefore I speak to you thus freely."

Lavinella smiled sadly. "Indeed, you mistake, Messer Michelotto," she said. She spoke frankly to Michelotto, and guessing him to be her friend and never aped secrecy where secrecy was impossible. "I have no more power with Cæsar than a child has with a lion. I love him—Heaven forgive me, I love him—but he takes my love as he takes all other things, just as part of Cæsar's portion, part of Cæsar's privilege, like the gold in his coffers, like the gold about his throat. He has whipped me into subjection, but I am the least of his subjects."

She sighed and was silent, and Michelotto was silent, too, not knowing what to say. Suddenly Lavinella looked up and addressed him:

"Have you any news of how my kinsfolk, the Orsini, fare?"

"They fare very badly," Michelotto answered. "Cæsar has played the devil with them ever since

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their damnable conspiracy was blown upon." He coughed again, remembering suddenly the share which Lavinella had in that conspiracy, and went on, hurriedly: "They are scattered and hiding here and there all over Italy ever since, hoping if they keep quiet that they may venture to thrust out their noses again when Cæsar's golden hour is over. But Cæsar's time is brighter than ever, and I am glad with all my heart to think that the Orsini are so woefully out at elbows."

"Why should it please you," Lavinella asked, "to think that the Orsini are in so poor a plight?"

Michelotto smiled. "Why, for this reason: the Orsini bear a certain lady a grudge."

Lavinella looked at him curiously. "You mean me?"

Michelotto nodded. "Even you. You were meant to kill Cæsar, you were bred to kill Cæsar, and you are Cæsar's mistress."

Lavinella made a gesture of protest. "I loved him before I knew who he was."

Michelotto waved her words aside. "The Orsini do not value such distinctions a pin. There must have been a hundred times when you could have killed Cæsar—and you have not killed Cæsar."

Lavinella sighed. "I cannot help loving him."

"Yes," agreed Michelotto, "and they cannot help hating you for so loving. But it is not my business to put their case. If you were in their power they

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would do you ill turns, so I give thanks that you will not be in their power."

Lavinella sighed again. "May our Lady's care keep me from their hands," she said, fervently, and she felt cold in the warm sunlight as she thought of what might happen to her if she were again in the grip of her kinsfolk.

"Amen to that," said Michelotto, earnestly. "The Orsini are now no more than a harmless twist of vipers under Cæsar's heel. They would sting if they could, but they cannot." He paused as his glance travelled along the pergola. "Lord Cæsar is coming," he said. "I will wait upon his pleasure." He bowed again very reverentially and drew apart in the shadow of the trees, leaving Lavinella to her thoughts.

Lavinella seated herself at the foot of the terrace, and sat with her hands clasped about her knees looking dreamily before her, wondering at her strange and terrible life, and vainly trying to guess what its end might be. It could scarcely be other than strange and terrible.

Cæsar came slowly down the pergola, very gorgeously attired, a glittering, magnificent figure in cloth of gold. In the crook of each of his elbows he carried a great golden jar, and these two vessels he carefully deposited on the table before he turned to Lavinella and touched her upon the shoulder. She looked up at him, and he could see, though he



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did not heed, that her eyes were shining with restrained tears.

Lavinella turned eagerly to Cæsar. "I have waited long for you," she cried.

Cæsar answered her impatiently. "Your pardon, lady, but I perceive an honest gentleman who waits upon me seemingly and with whom I have immediate business. Will you walk awhile in the gardens till I have done with him?" He glanced toward the vine-rows as he spoke, where Banda still strayed with Agapito. Lavinella, who had learned in the drift of years to obey Cæsar, moved quietly away for some distance, the color of her clothes gleaming brightly between the trees as she walked. Cæsar then beckoned to Michelotto, who approached him. "Well?" he said to the bravo.

The bravo shook his head. "Banda will not lend a penny," he said.

Cæsar smiled grimly. "A pity," he said, commiseratingly—"a pity. If he had been generous, who knows, I might have been generous, too, and left him something. As it is, it is as it is." He whispered some instructions to Michelotto, and then beckoned to Banda, who came smilingly forward from the alleys of the vines and hurried to his side. Michelotto joined Agapito, and the pair disappeared down the pergola in the direction of the palace.

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Cæsar laid a hand caressingly upon Banda's shoulder and prevented him from kneeling.

Banda beamed at Cæsar's graciousness. "My lord, my homage is at your feet," he protested.

Cæsar eyed him from top to toe with an amiable glance. "You are in good health, I hope?" he said, solicitously.

Banda answered, cheerfully, "I am very well."

"No loss of appetite?" Cæsar asked.

Banda shook his head.

"No pain or headache?" Cæsar continued, almost purring his interrogatory.

Banda shook his head more vigorously than before. "I thank Heaven," he said, "that I am as sound as any man in Rome."

Cæsar appeared relieved, and repeated Banda's remark, "As sound as any man in Rome," in a very satisfied manner. "That is good," he went on. "I hear, too, that you are richer of late?"

Banda smiled modestly. "I have inherited somewhat," he said, "from an uncle." Then he hastened to add, "Land, land—only land."

Cæsar's pleasure seemed to increase. "You are a very happy man," he murmured, "to be so happy and so wealthy." Suddenly his voice took on a graver note. "Yet, Messer Banda," he went on, "when we meditate upon this world, upon the gravity of life and the fleeting nature of all pleasures, when we meditate like this, I say—"

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He paused for a moment, and Banda, presuming upon the pause, interrupted him timidly and truthfully, "I never meditate."

Cæsar laid his hand gently on Banda's head. "You are not yourself, my friend," he said, "or you would not make such an assertion. With such a headpiece for philosophy, it is inevitable that you must meditate on life."

Banda grinned foolishly, thinking he looked wise. "What is the good of meditation?" he asked. "I eat, I drink, I love; that is my philosophy."

Cæsar smiled good-humoredly. He seemed to take a great delight in Banda's answers. "An excellent philosophy, too," he agreed. "Still, now and then," he went on, in a voice of mocking solemnity, "in idle moments, between eating and drinking and loving, you must reflect that your life is somewhat purposeless and that you have lived it long enough."

Banda drew back with a little cry of dismay. "Never, my lord, I promise you," he cried.

Cæsar's manner was still very caressing, but there was an ominous irony in his face. "Remember, friend," he said, "you cannot live forever."

Banda nodded his head vehemently. "I would live as long as I can," he cried.

Cæsar shook his head and spoke gravely: "That is greedy; that is selfish. Remember, Messer Banda,

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that while you live you keep me out of my inheritance."

Banda felt the menace in Cæsar's words and Cæsar's manner, and tried to meet it. "My lord," he whined, "I have rendered you many services."

Cæsar smiled contemptuously. "Since we made friends, Messer Banda, you have betrayed some half a dozen fools who schemed against me while I climbed the hill of empire. All this while you have lived—you have eaten, you have drunk, you have gambled. Naturally enough, you now are tired of life and wish to end it."

Banda almost screamed his denial. "No, indeed!" he vociferated.

Cæsar shook his head as one who was not to be persuaded. "You do," he protested. "I read in your honest eyes, Messer Banda, the Roman resolve to kill yourself."

Banda was now trembling and stammering incoherent assurances that he cherished no such thoughts, but Cæsar did not seem to heed his denial. "How will you do it?" he asked.

"My lord! my lord!" Banda pleaded. He could say no more, for his terrors choked him, but Cæsar seemed unaware of his alarm.

"Well," he said, "please yourself in the manner of your death, since you are determined to die."

The very agony of fear gave Banda a kind of courage. "By Heaven, I will not die!" he pro-

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tested, and tried to square himself against Cæsar and Cæsar's menacing gaze. So might an unusually foolish bird endeavor to defy the fascination of the snake.

Cæsar looked at Banda whimsically, and then glanced to the terrace where Michelotto had now returned with a quince of bravos. Cæsar made a sign to Michelotto, and Michelotto and his bravos descended the steps and ringed themselves around the distressed gentleman. "Take Messer Banda to his house," Cæsar commanded, "and set a guard about it. In the morning come and tell me how he died."

Banda tried to fling himself at Cæsar's feet, but he was held and gripped by the bravos. "Have mercy, Cæsar!" he screamed, and his cry startled Lavinella from her reflections in that distant alley where she walked apart and mused, waiting on Cæsar's pleasure. Quickly she caught up her skirts and ran toward her master.

"What is the matter?" she asked, anxiously, as she came within call and saw the bravos huddled about poor Banda, that struggled in their midst.

Cæsar turned to her sharply. "Do not meddle, sweet," he said, "or we shall quarrel. This is all a jest, and I have had enough of it." He turned to Michelotto. "Take him away," he ordered, and turned his back upon the scuffle. When Michelotto and the bravos had removed the struggling and

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protesting Banda, and the garden was quiet again, Cæsar turned to Lavinella. "You wish to speak with me?" he said. "What do you want?"

Lavinella was too familiar with strange sights and sounds in the places where Cæsar dwelt to be seriously concerned because a stout gentleman unknown to her was being roughly handled by Cæsar's men at Cæsar's order. Had she even seen cause to interfere, she would not have done so, but would have held her peace, having learned with time to be wise in such matters. Besides, her immediate interest was in her own case; she had need to plead for herself.

## V

### "THE VICE OF WOMEN"

LAVINELLA looked appealingly at Cæsar and cried his name to him, "Cæsar!" as if in reproach at his coldness; then she added, sadly, "I have been thinking."

"What were your meditations?" Cæsar asked, indifferent. He had already forgotten Banda; he was wishful to forget Lavinella and her threatened importunities.

Lavinella gazed at him pathetically. "Ever the same—what my life would be like if you did not love me." She hesitated, then questioned, eagerly, "But you do love me?"

"Assuredly," Cæsar answered, but the sound of his voice had little fervor and less comfort in it for the woman who waited on his words.

So Lavinella sighed again, which was unwise, for Cæsar detested sighs or any other signs of dumps in women. "I am like all women in this," she said, "and long for the love-words repeatedly. They never seem stale or ancient." There had been a

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time when she hated herself for loving Cæsar, but the time had passed.

Cæsar smiled. "Why should they, if the speaker's meaning be always young?" He surveyed her smoothly, with the music of eternal truth now as ever in his voice.

Lavinella looked steadfastly at him now, neither smiling nor sighing. "I have given you much, O wonderful Cæsar, in giving you my love."

Cæsar returned her steadfast gaze steadfastly. "You gave me your love when you called me Alexander," he said, and there was a suspicion of irony in his voice.

"But," Lavinella replied, "when I found you were Cæsar, of the house of Borgia, I still gave you my love."

"Love should not change for a change of name," Cæsar affirmed, affably.

Lavinella stretched out her hands appealingly to him with a cry. "I could not help it, Cæsar. Since ever you compelled my wrestling flesh to surrender to your pleasure I have become your creature, your slave; I serve you like a soul bewitched. You are the enemy of my house, the enemy of my race, and yet in spite of all I love you. For your love I have forgotten my kin, denied my race."

Cæsar made her an almost needlessly ceremonious bow, but there was an unpleasant light in his eyes as he answered, "I am ever grateful." He made



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as if he would leave her, and Lavinella should have been warned that his patience was waning, but she still appealed to him.

"It was the will of God," she said, "and not to be resisted. I still often see in my dreams our two planets burning side by side in heaven. Cæsar, Cæsar, believe what I believe—believe that I am your good-fortune."

Cæsar smiled disagreeably. "Cheerfully," he assented, but the tone of his voice was not cheerful.

Lavinella went on speaking, ignoring the growing menace in Cæsar's eyes. "The Orsini would kill me with great cruelty if I were in their power, Cæsar. They hate me with a mighty hate, because I love you whom I was trained to hate and trained to slay."

Cæsar looked maliciously amused. "The poor devils must feel vexed," he commented, and then fell to looking at his finger-nails, a sign with him of great weariness of the matter toward.

But Lavinella persisted. "I must never fall into their hands, Cæsar. I could not bear their grave, accusing faces. I should fear their scornful glances scarcely less than the torments they would make ready for my wretched flesh."

Cæsar nodded. "Have no fear, sweeting; it is my business to take, not to give. And now with no more words leave me, for presently I give audience here."

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Lavinella looked at him anxiously. "Do you banish me?" she said.

Cæsar smiled on her with an almost menacing smile. "Your mission," he said, "Lady Sweet-lips, is to entertain my leisure, but you must not plague me in my public time. God be with you. You will see me again by-and-by."

"You treat me like a child, Cæsar," Lavinella said, sadly.

Cæsar mocked her, copying her words. "I treat you like a child because I think you are like a child, Madonna, as unschooled, as irrational as any child that is raw to the world. You are a charming child, certainly, but the charming child must now leave me."

Lavinella made him a reverence. "Your servant, Cæsar," she said, simply, for she knew that when Cæsar commanded to contest were idle. Then she turned and went away from him along the pergola out of sight.

Cæsar yawned a little after Lavinella left him. "It is the vice of women," he mused, "never to know when they begin to weary their lovers." The reflection vexed him, and he was still frowning when Michelotto came through the trees and interrupted his thoughts.

"Michelotto!" he cried; and when the bravo neared him he asked, "What have you done with fat Banda?"

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"He is safely lodged in his house," Michelotto answered, with a pleased air, "and there is so good a guard about him that I promise you he cannot quit it."

"Is he still," Cæsar asked, "so Roman resolute to take his life?"

"He is not to be moved from his stubborn purpose," Michelotto answered, with the same air of gravity that he saw it pleased Cæsar to wear in this singular conversation, "'Dulce et decorum est,' he protests, 'pro patriâ mori.' I did not think he had so much Latinity."

Cæsar was amused at the gratified, satisfied manner with which his henchman mouthed his tag. "Well," he said, "it is good to think that the old, stern virtues still thrive among us. Who would have guessed that Banda the epicurean should end as Banda the stoic? Let him pass in peace to the infernal gods." He paused for a moment as if in ironic respect to the obsequies of Banda, then he asked, "As you came through the palace did you see the physicians?"

"Yes, my lord," Michelotto answered.

"How is my father," Cæsar asked, with an anxiety which at least had the merit of appearing filial. "Last night he seemed better."

"His holiness is well," Michelotto answered. "His physicians say that one more day of rest will give him back his full health and strength."

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"I am glad of it," Cæsar cried, heartily. "My father's life is very precious to my purpose. So long as he is king in Christendom I play my game to the best advantage, and hold the winning card, the noble Pope that takes all tricks. God bless my father, he is my great ally. I think the shining morning promises a splendid noon."

Michelotto looked about him snuffing the soft air. "The day is fine," he agreed.

Cæsar laughed. "I spoke in images," he said, "I thought of my own day. I think I have climbed very nearly to the top of the mountain, and when I reach it I mean to camp on the summit for a long, long time, watching where vassal Italy lies at my feet. I am almost free now of any trouble."

"Almost free?" Michelotto echoed. "What is there to vex you now?"

Cæsar frowned. "There is a certain man in Rome," he said, "who troubles me when he draws his daily breath. He seems to me the last symbol—I will not say of menace to my success, but of grudge against it; and as I do not love those that grudge me anything, I wish him out of the way. You know the man I mean."

Michelotto smiled. "His eminence the red-fox Rovere," he suggested.

Cæsar laughed agreement. "You read me like a book," he said. "Rovere wearies me; Rovere

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troubles me. Is it right that I should be wearied? Is it right that I should be troubled?"

Michelotto shook his head. "No," he answered, emphatically.

"Well," said Cæsar, "I think I see a way out of my trouble, and I have a mind to tell you what that way is. I have played my fish a long time, but he rises to the fly at last. We feast together here to-day, and though he comes to join me with an army at his heels little less than I should lead against a mutinous town, I think I shall find my way to him. For he comes to drink with me, and the wine I shall brim for him shall be the elixir of old death." He pointed to the two golden flagons that he had placed on the table. "Those flagons are filled with wine that would please the throats of the old gods if they came down from Olympus to feast with me." He thrust his hand into his bosom and drew out a small phial, which he held up for a moment to the light, regarding it affectionately. Then he poured the contents of the phial, a pale, greenish liquor, into one of the flagons and put the empty phial away.

"There," he said, "now the drink that would have pleased the throat of Zeus becomes a draught for Dis. I think the grim ferryman is waiting now on the near side of the Styx to take Rovere's soul into his wherry."

Michelotto looked and spoke doubts: "Will not

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the honorable Cardinal Rovere expect some one to taste his wine?"

Cæsar nodded. "He will, friend, and his wish shall be gratified. I myself will be his eminence's taster."

Michelotto stared. "You will taste the deadly wine?"

"Yes and no," Cæsar answered. "I shall seem to taste."

Michelotto shook his head. "Cardinal Fox will not be so cozened. No sham sippings at the brim for him."

Cæsar seemed amused at his henchman's objections. "Nay, I shall seem to drain my draught to the dregs. You see this cup." He took a golden cup from the table and showed it to Michelotto, pointing to its beauties and praising them with a voice as soft as a lover's. "It is a noble piece of gold-work, with hot fauns chasing round-limbed nymphs, and two plump sea-women for the handles. This I will fill full, suck at thirstily, and then invert so empty that there is scarce a drop for the infernal gods."

Michelotto gaped in admiration. "How is the trick done?"

Cæsar explained with an artist's pride in a masterpiece. "Very simply—the cup is double, a shell within a shell. What liquid you pour in it trickles into the shell, and when you lift your vessel the

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liquor slips, an unwilling prisoner, between the inner and outer cases of the cup."

Michelotto looked a still puzzled approval. "'Tis a good trick," he declared. "But when you wish to drink in reality?"

Cæsar explained: "Why, then, my Nestor, I reach me this other cup, fill from this other flagon, and, my enemy's suspicions thus subtly lulled, drink pleasantly at my ease and watch him drifting down sweet Lethe to the gate of hell."

Michelotto still doubted. "If he seek to drink of your wine, to change his cup?" he suggested.

Cæsar dissipated his doubts. "Why he shall share and welcome," he protested. "The first draught from the venomed flask will have done his business. Indeed, I shall spill it, as if by mischance, when he has drunk enough for my purpose."

Michelotto applauded him with uplifted hands. "Heaven bless your excellence for having such a delicate invention."

Then his gaze travelled along the pergola and he whispered to Cæsar, "Here comes your man in red with your man in black."

## VI

### THE SHADOW OF A STATUE

FOLLOWING the direction of Michelotto's gaze, Cæsar, too, looked down the pergola and saw Rovere approaching him, accompanied by Ugo, escorted by Agapito, and followed at a little distance by a cluster of armed men. He laughed a little grimly.

"Yes," he said, "here come Cardinal Fox and Nephew Wolf to visit Lord Lion." In a lower, sterner voice he ordered Michelotto: "When we sit to feast have my men at arm's reach. When the thing happens that will happen let them take count of Rovere's men. Heaven bless your eminence!" he cried, in another voice, that was full of cheerful welcome, as Rovere and Agapito entered the little space. Ugo and the armed following had withdrawn out of sight.

Michelotto saluted the Cardinal respectfully and quitted the company. Rovere clasped Cæsar's extended hand with an air of bluff and simple cordiality.

"The blessing of Heaven upon my lord of Bor-



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gia," he said. "I have been praising these vineyards to your secretary, and I leave him to report my homage, for it irks me to praise any man's possessions to his face."

"His eminence," said Agapito, suavely, "was pleased to call these grounds a little paradise."

Cæsar protested with an air of great satisfaction. "Your eminence overflatters my vanity," he said. "I think we shall do the place full justice if we call it the Garden of Epicurus, nothing more."

Agapito addressed the Prince and the Cardinal. "Have I your leaves to depart?" he asked. "I have Messer Ugo to entertain."

Cæsar nodded. "If by chance," he said, "any one should come seeking audience with me with the word 'Genoa' for a password, tell Michelotto to send him to me instantly."

Agapito bowed, knelt and kissed the Cardinal's hand, and withdrew. Cardinal Rovere looked about him with an air of plain approval untroubled by any hint of envy. "How delicate the air is!" he said.

There was an irony in Cæsar's eyes as he answered, but his voice told only his delight in the sunshine and the clear day. "I love this time," he declared. "I love to see the air quiver with heat and to smell its exquisite perfume. Might we not even think, you and I, who love the ancient days and the ancient divinities, that some glorious goddess of the dawn, passing swiftly on her way to make some

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mortal lover happy, had cast ambrosial odors on the blazing haze of the noontide?"

Rovere sighed. "I wish I had your highness's imagination," he murmured. "I should like to see an ancient goddess, or ancient god, for that matter."

"Why should we talk of the old gods?" Cæsar protested. "On such a day as this I feel that I am myself a god, with the world for my football, all passions for my playthings, and all desires so many merry whets to renewed satisfaction. Jove must have married Juno on some such day as this."

Rovere looked about him with an air of great simplicity. "The day is very fine," he agreed, "and I have a good appetite."

Cæsar clapped his hands. "Heaven be praised for that," he said, "for I can promise you such fare as the old gods we talk of would not have disdained. Nightingales stuffed with olives, which make him who eats them poetical, the brawn of bear to give you the heart of Hector, and noble oysters that would prime you for all the labors of Hercules."

Now, although Cæsar spoke with so much cheerful extravagance, what he said was in no way characteristic of his nature. For Cæsar was not only in no sense a glutton, but he was scarcely even an epicurean, in the debased, degraded use of the word, in aught that concerned food and drink. He was too consciously and too determinedly the

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great soldier to permit himself any gross interest in such pleasures. Either Cæsar or no one—he was Cæsar, too, in this matter. The spare, sane, splendid Roman who conquered huge capitals of the world on the simple fare of the legionaries was too keen-witted and too clean-witted to be ever the man for surrender to any debauchery of the flesh. And whatever Cæsar of old Rome was, that Cæsar of new Rome would be, too. Time should show him as no voluptuary of flesh and flagons, no waster of rare time over groaning tables, no swollen bulk of flesh and wine. Cæsar was ever a spare eater, one that dieted himself wisely with a view to the fit training of the active body, one whose bulk should never be too heavy, whose mind never too relaxed and flabby for active exercise of all the dominating qualities, for untouchable readiness to face any possible emergency. The man of camps, the man of battles, the man of attacks could never swine it in the sensual pen. For him life was ever alert, with the banner of defiance always flying, and he would have counted that a poor kind of pleasure which was gratified by the overeating of any particular viand or the overdrinking of an admired vintage. But here, as ever, he knew, or thought he knew, his man, and guessed that it would be necessary and apt to appear as a votary of Lucullus and a disciple of Apicius in the eyes of his guest, who was known for a mighty eater and drinker. So,

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with a ready wit and a ready tongue, Cæsar rattled on, seeming to be a gastronomer to the top of his bent, and playing his part as gayly and vehemently as if the masterpiece of a scholarship of cooks were of more notable importance than all his conquests in the Romagna. And while he spoke, and his face beamed with its false enthusiasm for food, his eyes smiled to catch the light of physical pleasure that gleamed in the eyes of the Cardinal, his guest.

"I will give the best proof of my readiness," Rovere said, "for I swear that I am as hungry as you are eloquent."

"The theme inspires me," Cæsar said, "for to your true epicure the feast, war, and love deserve equal homage; but before we sit let us settle that business which is the blessed cause of our session. I wish to have your judgment upon that wonder-toy I told you of, that comely witness of those glorious pagan days when the world was younger and lovelier, and when it was better to be beautiful than to be wise." He gave a sigh. "I should have lived in that time, Cardinal."

Rovere laughed good-humoredly. "You appear to me to do very well in these poor days," he said.

Cæsar shrugged his shoulders. "I seem to move," he said, "like a lonely god in a world of pygmies, and have no chance to test my greatness in a struggle with my peers. Well, we must make the best of things, and be thankful when that older, braver

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world shows that it still has some gifts to give us, as, for instance, my wonder-toy."

"What is this toy?" Rovere asked.

"Your eminence," Cæsar said, "may remember that long ago we sent your nephew on a mission to Genoa."

"I remember," said Rovere; "he was to buy some piece of antiquity which the owner would not part with, so Ugo came home with empty hands and full pockets."

"Denial always increases my desire," Cæsar said, "and Messer Leonardo was so full of his praises of the image that I sent him lately as my ambassador to Genoa, and he had better luck than your nephew."

"Did he bring back the image?" Rovere asked.

"Yes and no," Cæsar answered. "He brought back the image of the image; he got permission to take a plaster copy, and when I saw this cast I was more resolved than ever that I would possess the original, even if it would cost the half of my fortune. I am waiting daily, hourly, for a messenger from the man at Genoa to treat with me."

"What does the image represent?" Rovere asked, with evident growing curiosity.

"It is a Venus, a Venus moulded in bronze. At least, the man who found the marvel, in a kind of cave beneath an apple-tree in his orchard, calls it Venus, and it well deserves the name, for never yet

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was an image made of a woman that looked so like a goddess. It is a figure of a girl that is almost a woman, of a woman that is still a girl; a creature ripe for all desires, eager to change exquisite ignorance for yet more exquisite knowledge; a being that seems to breathe the promise of passion and to glow into life and love as you look at it. There is a tale told by an old Greek of a man that fell in love with the statue of Aphrodite, and could not be content until he had clasped the placid marble in his arms. I swear to you that the sight of this image moves me to little less than his madness."

Rovere stroked his chin and looked wise. "If the thing be as perfect as you say," he said, thoughtfully, "the owner will want a great deal of gold for it."

"I tell you," Cæsar answered, "I should think its loveliness cheap if I could buy it at the price of a kingdom. I find it embodies the very rose, the very star of womanhood, of the womanhood of dreams that we never find upon earth. How seldom, when we amuse our idleness with delicate wantons, do we find that they at all approach the perfection for which we yearn. There is always some error in a woman's flesh — an ugly arm, a graceless leg, a mouth too large, a mouth too small — God knows there is always some imperfection to take the edge off our pleasures. It is not given to us to embrace a perfect woman in the flesh, but in

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bronze, but in stone, we find our desires for perfection realized, as in this image I have brought you here to see."

"My lord, my lord," cried Rovere, his imagination whipped by Cæsar's speech, and now in a very ecstasy of eagerness, "where is this wonder of the world?"

Cæsar pointed to the little temple at the end of the terrace. "I have set the copy in yonder temple, but the shrine is unworthy even of the copy."

Rovere entreated as eagerly as a lover on the threshold of his sweetheart's room, "May I see it at once?"

"Surely," said Cæsar. "Enter and kneel in adoration."

Rovere slowly ascended the steps of the terrace and entered into the temple. Cæsar was about to follow him when Michelotto came hurriedly down the pergola and called to him.

## VII

### THE PRICE OF A STATUE

“MY lord,” Michelotto said, “there is a man come that asks instant audience of you. He hails from Genoa.”

Cæsar clapped his hands. “Good!” he said. “I will speak to him at once.”

Michelotto retraced his steps a little way and returned, bringing with him a man humbly clad and travel-stained, who bowed respectfully to Cæsar Borgia. Cæsar Borgia had never beheld the countenance of Pandolfo Orsini, but even if he had he might very well have failed to recognize in this man of almost squalid appearance and cunningly darkened skin the desperate and daring emissary of his enemies. Cæsar beckoned to Pandolfo to approach.

“Have you come,” he said, “with authority to treat for this statue?”

Pandolfo bowed and handed Cæsar a sealed letter. Cæsar broke the seal and read the words that qualified the bearer to treat for the exile of Genoa.

“I tell you, man,” said Cæsar, playfully, “I have



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so hot an affection for this statue of your master's that I verily believe its warmth might serve to melt its bronze. Name your master's price for the image."

Pandolfo answered, slowly, "My master has but one price, and that is unchangeable."

Cæsar frowned a little at this aggressive opening to the deal. "Do you think I should haggle, rascal?" he said, sharply. "Name your price and done with it."

Pandolfo spoke again with the same changeless, resolute voice: "I am but a humble emissary from my master, but the voice of an Orsini speaks through my lips. My master bids me say that you shall have the statue if, in exchange for so much perfect bronze, you will give him so much perfect flesh, and in so doing restore an Orsini to an Orsini."

Cæsar stared at Pandolfo in blank astonishment. "I do not understand you," Cæsar said; "please speak more clearly."

"I will speak quite clearly," Pandolfo answered, "so clearly that any child in Rome could know my meaning. My master will give you up the statue if you will give up to him Madonna Lavinella."

Pandolfo spoke as coldly as if he were proposing a matter of every-day traffic, but Cæsar started as if the man had suddenly struck him. "Madonna Lavinella!" he repeated, and Pandolfo said again,

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as coldly and soberly as before, "Madonna Lavinella."

Now Cæsar laughed angrily. "Are you drunk," he said, "to play the huckster in this fashion?"

Pandolfo made a gesture of respectful determination that deprecated anger. "I have named my price for my master," he said, "as I have been told to do. It is for you to take or leave it."

There was a moment's pause as the two men faced each other warily.

Then Cæsar spoke. "Let us talk seriously," he said. "I will give you much gold for your image. I know it to be precious; I know it to be a wonder. Name me its price in gold, and cease all idle mystification."

Pandolfo shook his head resolutely. "My master does not want gold," he said. "He asks for flesh. If you will give the woman into my custody to-day, my master swears by the Son of Heaven that he will send you the bronze statue."

Cæsar looked curiously at him under his knitted brows. "Why should I take your word?" he asked, and yet even as he spoke he divined the answer.

Pandolfo shrugged his shoulders. "You do not love the Orsini, illustrious," he said, "but you know that they always keep their word whether it be spoken in love or in hate. What an Orsini promises he will always perform."

This was a bold statement, but Cæsar knew it to

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be true. He stood for a while plunged in troubled thoughts. Presently the Cardinal Rovere came bustling out of the temple and, descending the steps, hastened to his side. "My lord of Borgia," he cried, in an ecstasy of enthusiasm, "this statue of yours is truly the eighth wonder of the world. If the copy be only one-fifth as beautiful as the pattern, the bronze must be the nonpareil of loveliness. What price does the man ask for it? How I wish that the opportunity were given to me to buy it! What is the price?"

Pandolfo turned to him. "If the illustrious Cæsar Borgia will not buy it on my terms, the statue shall be yours, lord Cardinal, for a thousand florins."

Rovere gasped with astonishment and stared at Cæsar with eyes shining with cupidity. "A thousand florins!" Here was a staggering offer. To ask a thousand florins for such a work of art was practically to give it away. He could not believe that Cæsar should boggle at such a bargain. "My lord of Borgia," he said, "do you hesitate over such an offer?"

Cæsar smiled sourly. "The fellow has another price for me," he muttered.

Rovere sighed. "By Zeus!" he protested, "I would beggar myself to buy that statue, and feel myself rich in having it, though I had nothing else in the world." And he sighed again, for he had a great love for beautiful things.

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Cæsar turned to Pandolfo impatiently. "Be reasonable," he said; "ask what you will and you shall have it."

"I ask what I will," Pandolfo answered, with unmoved mien and unaltered voice. "I offer the bronze for flesh." Then, as if becoming impatient at the hesitation of Cæsar, he turned again to Rovere. "My lord Cardinal, if my lord Cæsar Borgia will not pay my price, you can house the wonder for a thousand florins."

Rovere looked from the seller to the buyer in bewilderment. "What does he mean," he asked, "by bartering bronze for flesh?"

Cæsar laughed uneasily, his mirth patently unreal. "The fellow has the audacity of a fiend," he said, "and wishes to buy a living beauty for his bronze beauty."

Rovere turned to Pandolfo. "Is this so, fellow?" he asked. "Do you really wish to make so strange a bargain?"

"I should not find it strange," Pandolfo answered, very gravely, "if I desired a woman, to endeavor to compass my desire. My master hungers for a certain piece of woman's flesh, and is willing to buy it with this matchless image, though truly it is a great price to pay for a fancy."

Cæsar appealed to him. "You are a bold rogue," he said, "but I will pardon your boldness if you change your tune. Take gold, take jewels,

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take what treasures you will in exchange for the statue."

Pandolfo shook his head decisively. "I have said my say," he said, "and you only waste my time and yours in trying to bargain. It is off or on, and no more to say to it."

Cæsar looked steadily at him. "You will not change?" he asked.

Pandolfo answered with a glance as steady, "I will not."

Cæsar, who understood men, knew that he meant what he said, and was silent awhile.

Rovere rested a plump hand on Cæsar's arm. "My lord," he said, "although I advise you against my own interest, I must say this much: The world is full of beautiful women, but the world has not got such another statue as this. If, as I take it, this fellow's master cherishes a fancy for some one of your light o' loves, why not let him have his whimsy. What is a leman more or less to you compared to such a masterpiece?"

Cæsar looked at Pandolfo. "Stand apart," he commanded, and Pandolfo withdrew to a little distance under the shade of some trees, where he was out of hearing of the speech of the great. Cæsar kept silence for another brace of seconds, then he broke into an angry laugh. "You are in the right, my lord Cardinal," he said, and clapped his hands.

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A page appeared. Cæsar commanded, "Bid Madonna Lavinella wait upon us here."

The page bowed and departed.

Rovere gaped at Cæsar. "Madonna Lavinella!" he repeated. "Is hers the flesh he covets?"

Cæsar answered him gayly, though again the gayety seemed forced. "Even her white flesh," he answered. "It seems as if the Orsini could not be happy without the girl."

There was a moment's pause, and then Rovere spoke again. "It is no part of my business, but we are men and lovers, and for the hour friends. If you deliver Madonna Lavinella to the Orsini, you know that the Orsini will do the woman much hurt."

Cæsar answered him with an increasing show of gayety. "Come, come, my lord Cardinal, it is no part of our duty to think of our neighbors. I take it that they act in a spirit of family love."

Rovere shrugged his shoulders. "Take it as you please," he said, with the air of one that has said his say and given his counsel and can do no more in the matter. If there be those that, obdurate in folly, are deaf to good advice, then nothing is left to the good advisers but the emphatic washing of hands. The politic Cardinal Rovere had done with the business for good or ill, but there was another standing by that had by no means done with it.

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As Michelotto stood and listened to the chaffering between the unknown emissary from Genoa and his master, he was conscious of a strange war of emotions within his breast. Up to that day, up to that hour, up to that minute Cæsar Borgia had been to him little less than a divinity. He had served him with a passionate fidelity, he had obeyed him unquestioningly, and if, a few short weeks, a few short hours before, it had been suggested to him as coming within the limits of possibility that he should reason, much more protest, against any word or action of his master's, he would have laughed his sardonic laugh at the idea as one too ludicrous for consideration. Michelotto, as he had said of himself to Agapito, was no common bravo. He had, as he boasted, gentle blood in his veins, but whether he drew that blood in direct and legitimate succession was a matter which he did not choose to dwell upon and which he did not allow others to discuss. He had, moreover, as he had also boasted, some degree of education, enough to make him appreciate his master's excellences as a scholar, as well as his master's supremacy as a soldier.

But of late days his heart had found another object of admiration in the person of Lavinella, and it rejoiced him to think that his devotion to the woman was happily part and parcel of his devotion to the man. He did not think of Lavinella without Cæsar, as he did not think of Cæsar without

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Lavinella. It was a splendid proof of the fitness of the world's laws that it should have given earth's loveliest woman to earth's greatest man, and Michelotto accounted himself tenfold happy to be the servant of such a pair of demigods. Not natively very observant, and not, in consequence of his position, mingling much with the great folk of the court, he heard little and believed less of such vague rumors as reached him of Cæsar's possible indifference to his mistress. Infidelity to her he would have taken as a matter of course, a matter of no moment. But indifference! Such a thing seemed to him to be incredible, and he gave it no credence. Wherefore now, when he saw that Cæsar was seemingly prepared to barter the body and the life of Lavinella for what seemed to him no more than a worthless piece of artifice, a sudden spirit of horror and indignation seemed to control him and to compel him to do what he had never yet dared to do, and never dreamed that he should ever dare to do, to pit himself for an instant against his master's will.

Quite suddenly he lost all sense of decorum, of the fitness of his subservient place, unquestioning, uncritical, in a well-appointed system. He became profusedly aware of some conflict of right and wrong quite apart from the wishes and the dictates of a Cæsar, quite apart from the indifferent acquiescence of a Rovere. Instinctively, impulsively, Michelotto moved toward Cæsar. Rovere, who



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was ascending the terrace to have another look at the image, had paused on the edge of the temple, and seemed to be absorbed in the magnificent panorama of the spreading Roman country afforded him from the terrace.

Michelotto, still acting upon a most unfamiliar impulse, now made bold to address Cæsar.

"Cæsar," he said, earnestly, "have you thought what this will mean to the poor lady?"

Michelotto was acting too unreasonably, according to the laws of reason that governed his universe, to have formed any thought of what might have happened as the result of his intervention. He was called upon to intervene in obedience to some voiceless promptings of compassion that would have amazed him if he had but considered them in cold blood. Still, he did intervene, with no speculation as to the result, having only the pale face of a fair and gracious lady before his eyes. The consequences of his interference were as immediate and fierce as the consequences of his act to one that puts a flame to a trail of saltpetre.

Cæsar turned upon him as a wounded wolf might turn suddenly upon a single dog that had pursued him to his lair. He was full of warring emotions that needed little to provoke an explosion, and Michelotto's words had supplied the spark. He glared at his servant with a raging face and drawn lips that showed his teeth, while his sucked breath

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seemed to whistle shrilly in his gullet; then he struck at his vassal savagely, and, though Michelotto was a strong man, he went down before the stroke of Cæsar's fist as helplessly as if the truculent ruffian had been no better than a child that is pushed aside by an angry nurse.

"Ah, beast!" Cæsar growled at him. "Did you speak? Since when have I wooed your wisdom? Do my bidding, beast, and be dumb about it, beast!"

As he spoke he kicked at Michelotto savagely, spurning him where he lay, and his fury was so insane and terrible that Michelotto, wildly recalled to the realities of life, grovelled on the grass as a man might grovel who is panic-stricken by a sudden thunder-storm.

Bewildered by the brawl, Rovere came hurrying down from the terrace with the air of one that would fain make peace. "Well, well, well!" he said. His hands were extended pacifically, and he clucked like an old hen.

## VIII

### MICHELOTTO—ANTAEUS

**I**N the old classical legend, when Hercules flung the giant with whom he wrestled to the earth, the giant gained new strength from the fall. In something of the same manner Michelotto, having sprawled supine upon the grass beneath the heel of Cæsar, was to rise to his feet with a new strength and a new determination. Those few moments of insult and humiliation, acting as they did in quick succession to the outrage offered to Lavinella, had in a twinkling made Michelotto a changed man, had taken his allegiance to Cæsar and torn it to tatters, and had strengthened with a terrible intensity his devotion to Lavinella. Michelotto's own pride as a man raged under his wrongs, but something higher and better than any personal pride or any personal vindictiveness seemed to call upon him to prove himself Lavinella's true servant, and to save her from the cruelty of a monster whom Michelotto now saw in his verity and whom Michelotto was now resolved to destroy.

But the change that had converted Michelotto

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from a faithful and unquestioning tool to a deadly and dangerous enemy gave him, together with his new hate, a new and terrible cunning to hide that hatred. He saw in one red flash of reason that to betray the least resentment at his treatment would be not only to destroy himself, but to destroy any chance he might have of serving Lavinella. It was, therefore, with an unnatural composure of face and bearing that he crouched on the grass at Cæsar's feet waiting with all seeming obsequiousness upon his master's will, while Rovere came waddling in between them to keep the peace.

Cæsar was all smiles for the Cardinal. "Forgive these brawls," he said. "Old servants have a passion for presuming on their old service, but we must humor them. Rise, fellow," he added, and Michelotto scrambled to his feet, wearing the studied composure that he marvelled at even while he practised it, and stood smiling with a well-worn air of good-humored humility that accepted Cæsar's chastisement as his due and deprecated any further punishment.

Cæsar thrust his hand into his pouch and drew out a handful of gold-pieces which he offered to the bravo. Michelotto took them and laughed; and Cæsar laughed, too, for Michelotto looked grotesque enough, with the stains of grass and earth about his garments and a queer, pale look on his face.

"The foot of Cæsar can only honor me," Miche-

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lotto said, cheerfully, as he thrust the gold-pieces into his pocket.

Cæsar looked at him with lowering brows. "You change your tune," he growled. It was not his way ever to regret any action of his, but he could have wished the Cardinal Rovere elsewhere than as a witness to such an ebullition.

Michelotto made a gesture of humble apology. "I was a forward ape," he said, "but I am the better for it by these," and he jingled together the coins that Cæsar had given him.

Cæsar laughed grimly. "Your penitence comes in time to save you a whipping," he said, and Michelotto seemed to feel the lash upon his shoulders as he spoke.

The Cardinal beamed with enthusiasm for the clemency of his host. "There is a kindly gentleman," he proclaimed. Then he added, hurriedly, "Here comes the lady," and pointed toward the pergola, down which Lavinella could be seen approaching, heralded by the page that had been sent to summon her. Rovere returned to the terrace and the temple and his admiration of the image, striving as patiently as he might with his growing appetite and his vexation at the delays that came between him and the means of gratifying it. Heartily he wished that the day on which he had consented to visit Cæsar had not proved to be a day so agitated, so crammed with action, so troublesome to a

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hungry epicure. Still, the sight of the statue delighted him, even though hunger gnawed at his vitals.

As for Michelotto, he stood apart, a changed man that seemed unchanged, outwardly the same rough-and-ready bravo that had taken Cæsar's orders and done Cæsar's work for this many a year. But from where he stood he could see how Madonna Lavinella came hurrying down the pergola, her pale face aflame with the sudden summons, her hair fluttered by the rapidity of her motion, for there was no breeze in that garden to temper the heaviness of that torrid day. Seeing her, Michelotto knew that his resolve was a true thing, and he was filled with a strange patience and a strange elation.

Cæsar turned to Lavinella, who advanced swiftly to greet him. "You sent for me?" she said.

Cæsar kissed her hand and smiled affectionately, as if he were about to tell her the welcomest news. "Nella mine," he said, "the good messenger brings better news for you. Your people hunger and thirst for your company. They cannot live in happiness without you. What am I to say them nay?"

Lavinella gave a great cry: "My lord, you will not fling me to the Orsini?"

Cæsar protested blandly. "Not fling, sweet," he murmured, repeating her word to deny it—"give back, restore to that honorable house the jewel

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which for a while I, unworthy as I am, have ventured to wear."

Lavinella caught at his hands and looked eagerly into his eyes. "Are you mocking, my lord?" she asked, with a passion of anxiety in her voice.

Cæsar reproved her gently. "Could I jest," he questioned, "where family affection cries for its lost lamb? Not so. I bleed to yield you, but the family call is as sacred as the voice of God."

Instantly Lavinella flung herself at his feet in desperate entreaty. "My dear lord," she pleaded, "by all the tenderness that has ever knitted our hands and hearts, do not deliver me to the Orsini. They call me a traitor; they hate me with great hate; they will torture me; they will not kill me for a long, long time. Do not give me to them."

Cæsar shook his head as a parent might shake his head at a forward child. "You wrong your kinsmen. They will cherish you tenderly."

Lavinella wailed, abasing herself. "I love you, I love you!" she moaned. "For the sake of our great love you cannot do this thing. For the sake of our great love have pity."

While Lavinella was making her plaint Michelotto stood within earshot, but his unchanging face showed no sign that he heard any word of her entreaties or of Cæsar's answers. He might have been the carved image of a man-at-arms, he stood so motionless, so rigid. As for Rovere, he kept look-

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ing out of the temple anxiously at intervals. Much as he loved the statue, famine was becoming paramount to æsthetics, and he yearned to be done with Cæsar's domesticities and to be seated at Cæsar's board.

Cæsar looked like a man who nobly surrenders himself to the inevitable. "It were an unchristian act to keep you here against the wishes of your kinsfolk. I have not the heart for such a crime."

He turned to the bravo. "Michelotto," he said, "yield my lady to her people."

Lavinella rose to her feet and looked steadfastly at him. "Cæsar," she said, "if your pity will not pay heed to my petition, let your wisdom be wiser than your pity. I have dreamed many times of our two stars burning together in heaven, and I think it is God's will that they should burn together. I was given to you to be your fortune. Ever since I have been with you, you have been fortunate. If you fling me away from you, you fling away your fortune with the same hand."

Cæsar snarled at her: "Do you think my fate depends upon the sick dreams of a woman? I am my own fate, I am my own star. I need no woman's hand to prop my glory."

Lavinella grew deadly pale and gave a great cry. "May God help me," she said. "May God forgive you." Then she wavered, reeled, stiffened, and fell in a faint at the feet of Cæsar.



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Cæsar looked at her carelessly. "Heaven is always on the side of Borgia," he asserted. He signed to Michelotto. "Get this lady hence quickly," he commanded. He turned and called to Rovere, who was peeping from the porch of the temple, "Shall we worship our image for a while, until this fretting business be ended?"

"I am at your service," Rovere said, wearily. He sadly needed a meal.

Cæsar mounted the steps of the terrace, and he and Rovere entered the temple together. Michelotto looked after them with a fierce light in his eyes and a fierce flush on his cheeks. He was silent, but if his thoughts had taken words they would have taken these words:

"My heart bleeds and my cheek burns. You have slain a sweet lady and you have struck me. It is too much."

With his eyes carefully fixed upon the temple which contained Cæsar and the Cardinal, Michelotto leaned against the splendidly spread table, and, putting his hand behind him, skilfully shifted the position of the two golden flagons, so that the harmless one would now be close to Cæsar's hand when he sat at table and the venomous flask some distance away from him. "Now, Cæsar, drink your fill," he muttered. He had no compunction for what he had done, no horror of what must come of this deed. He was Lavinella's partisan avenging her injuries.

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He walked toward the grove where Pandolfo waited, and beckoned him to approach. Pandolfo immediately quitted the shade of the trees and came to him. He had seen and heard nothing of what had passed.

"Where is the woman?" Pandolfo asked.

Michelotto caught him by the wrist while he pointed to the prostrate Lavinella. "There she lies. Take her away with you, since it must be so, but beware how you harm her. She has done a great deed for Italy to-day."

Pandolfo frowned. "What deed can the leman of Cæsar do for Italy?" he asked, bitterly.

Michelotto answered him: "Wait till to-night. You shall hear great news of her doings."

"You are Cæsar's man," Pandolfo said, scornfully.

Michelotto shook his head. "I am no man's man now. I am for my own service. I will come to you to-night with tidings. Then you shall praise her as a saint. She has done that which no one else could do. She has done that for which she has waited all these years."

Pandolfo looked at him curiously. "What has she done?" he questioned.

"I will tell you to-night," Michelotto answered. "If at that time my lord of Borgia be still despot of Rome, you can do what you please with her, and with me, too, for that matter. Until then I charge

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you on your conscience to do her no harm and to ask her no question. I pray you, I command you to wait until then."

The earnestness of Michelotto's manner had its effect upon Pandolfo. Michelotto, realizing that his hearer began to believe him, glanced at Lavinella and saw that the color was slowly returning to her cheeks. "See," he said, sadly, "she returns to her unhappy life."

Stooping, he assisted Lavinella tenderly to a seat. As she looked about her with haggard eyes of returning consciousness, she saw the dark face of Pandolfo watching her hardly, and with an effort restrained a scream.

"Must I go with you?" she asked, in a tragic whisper, of the man she had once known so well, once loved.

Michelotto endeavored to console her. "Go without fear," he whispered. "I have said some words for you that should have their effect. I will come to you to-night. Till then, hope."

Lavinella shook her head sadly. "I have done with hope," she sighed.

Pandolfo, chafing at the delay, beckoned to her sternly. "Come with me, Cæsar's toy," he said.

He took her by the hand, which she yielded to him passively, and the pair moved slowly out of sight down the pergola.

## IX

### “DRINK YOUR FILL”

FOR a little while Michelotto stood by himself thinking strange thoughts. Then Cæsar Borgia came out of the temple and descended the steps of the terrace.

Cæsar was speaking to Rovere. “Were there ever such limbs?” he asked his guest. Then he addressed Michelotto: “Is all done?”

Michelotto answered, “Ay, and well done.”

“I will be your trencher peer,” Rovere said, with alacrity. He had come a hungry man, and since his arrival there had been many obstacles to eating, now happily removed. Cæsar and Rovere seated themselves at the waiting table. Michelotto clapped his hands, and two pages appeared from a screen of rose-bushes and stood behind the chairs of Cæsar and the Cardinal.

“Come,” Cæsar cried, joyously—“come, we must drink to our happy understanding. Myself will be your taster.”

While he spoke he took up the flagon that stood by his hand. As he did so, Cardinal Rovere, under

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pretence of examining the golden cup that was placed before him, furtively wiped it out with his kerchief and eyed the fine linen cautiously. Apparently reassured, he waited until Cæsar had filled his own cup, and then, extending his goblet, allowed Cæsar to fill that, but he did not drink as yet, and waited watching Cæsar. Cæsar raised his chalice in salutation of the Cardinal, and, lifting it to his lips, he seemed to drink deep, throwing back his head, and when he seemed to finish his draught he inverted the cup and held it so over the grass for some seconds. Apparently satisfied, Rovere now took a moderate draught from his cup in his turn. He was ever a temperate drinker, too fastidious to swill. He found the wine delicious, and expressed his satisfaction in an ample smile. He spoke sympathetically, cheered by the glorious vintage. "I wish your father could join in our pledge."

"Why, so he shall," Cæsar answered, joyously. He had seemed to touch the top of joy in watching Rovere drink. Stretching his hand across the table, he took hold of the more distant flagon, and from it filled a third cup full of its contents. This he gave to the page behind his chair, commanding him: "Carry this up at once to my sire. Tell him to drink to our friendship with Cardinal Rovere."

Then he took, with a careless air, another cup from the table and filled it from the flagon he had

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last used. Leaning across the table, he saluted the Cardinal. "Now, Cardinal, I drink again to you," and as he spoke he drained his cup. He was now in high spirits and drinking deeper than his wont.

The Cardinal purred with pleasure as he sipped again at his liquor. "This is a noble wine," he pronounced, ecstatically.

Cæsar was delighted with his praise. "I am glad you find it so. I think Alcibiades must have drained such wine when he feasted with Socrates."

The Cardinal made a face. "The Greeks blended their wine with sea-water," he commented, sourly.

Cæsar sighed disapprovingly. "It is the only thing I know ill of them. It is like wedding 'will not' with 'will,' denial with desire, a cold ancient with a burning maid. Shame of such nuptials!"

The Cardinal took another modest draught. "It is a most exquisite vintage," he protested.

Cæsar urged him to increase his potations, but while he urged he seemed to stammer slightly, and his usual clear voice sounded strangely thick to his hearer's ears and to his own. "Drink deep of it, my lord; it briskens the wits, cleanses the liver, exalts the heart, works a Bacchic miracle." He suddenly gasped as if for breath and put his hand to his forehead. "It has a headiness greater than I thought," he muttered. "I have not drunk of it lately." He questioned his companion, fretfully, "Is it not very warm?"

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The Cardinal agreed. "It is, indeed, sultry, even in this shade."

Cæsar seemed to be choking for lack of air. "I did not think a day could be so hot," he complained. "I should like to strip and sit naked."

The Cardinal was quite agreeable. "As you please, my lord," he said, complacently, but Cæsar's manner puzzled him, and he observed him curiously.

Cæsar panted, and his lids looked heavy as he spoke drowsily: "If I were not a seasoned swinker I should think my wits were dizzy. To my eyes the hills are skipping for joy as the psalmist saw them."

The perplexed Cardinal, watching him and wondering, saw that his face was of a greenish white, and that there were great beads of sweat upon his forehead. "You do not seem well, my lord," he said, anxiously, and leaned forward to study Cæsar's face more closely.

Cæsar again drew his hand across his brow. "It is nothing," he murmured, "only I am too hot, yet no fevers lurk in these vineyards."

He laughed foolishly, and in the middle of his laughter the page who he had sent with the cup came rushing hurriedly down the pergola toward him, screaming, "My lord, my lord!" He reached the table and flung himself at Cæsar's feet. Cæsar turned a little toward him and eyed him dully. "What is the matter?" he asked.

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"Your father, his holiness—" The page gasped and could say no more.

Cæsar seemed to be sinking into a lethargy. "What of my father?" he asked, drowsily.

"He is dead," the page said, with a frightened scream in his voice, and the meaning of his words had the power to stir Cæsar into familiar activity. "God's life! what?" he cried, and made to rise from the table, but could not.

The page told his brief tale, trembling while he told. "He did but drink a cup of wine to your health, and then with a great cry he died."

Cæsar made another effort to rise from his chair, but failed and fell back again heavily. "What is the matter with me?" he gasped.

The Cardinal had risen and was leaning over the table looking at him. "You look very ill," Rovere said. He spoke compassionately, but there was an anxiety in his voice that was not altogether due to compassion.

Cæsar clasped at his sides like a man in great pain. "Gods, ill! Do you feel well at ease?"

"Very well, I thank Heaven," the Cardinal answered, and, while he was heartily glad to be able to speak the truth, he began to appreciate that something had happened not meant to happen.

Cæsar glared at him. Trying to overcome the dumbness of his senses, trying to stop the throbbing of his temples, trying to stay the aching of his body,



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he screamed at Rovere: "My father dead, and you well, and I like this! Here is some trick. Damn you, how did you do this?"

As he spoke he drew his dagger and again tried to rise, but failed. Failing, he struck impotently at the Cardinal, who was well out of his reach, and only jabbed the steel into the table. The Cardinal pushed back his chair in alarm, and called out: "Help! help! my lord is mad! Help!" The whole world seemed to have changed to him during the last few seconds, and he gaped as a man might gape that walked in his sleep and woke to find himself poised on the edge of a yawning precipice. "Help!" he cried again, and instantly down the pergola hurried the little cluster of the Cardinal's people, the little company of armed men waiting upon emergency, Ugo da Rovere at their head. Agapito was with them, and Agapito saw that Cæsar was sitting all huddled in his chair and asking, foolishly, "Is there no air?"

The Cardinal pointed to Cæsar and spoke to the secretary: "Look to your master; he is of a sudden distraught. I take my leave."

Instantly the Cardinal hurried away, with his people about him, his one wish being to be free from the terrible place. There was no attempt to stop them; there was no one to interfere with them.

Agapito passionately entreated Cæsar: "What ails my lord?"

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Cæsar made a desperate effort and roused himself, speaking shrilly: "I am ratted in my own trap. The antidote, the antidote!" As he spoke he plucked from his bosom a small phial and drained the contents. Then he flung the phial from him with a sigh of relief. "Send for my physicians! A thousand crowns to the man who first brings one."

The two pages sped away from him as if they had the wings of Hermes on their heels. With a desperate effort Cæsar rose from his seat and strove to support himself by the edge of the table, gripping it hard with both hands. Agapito caught him round the body and sustained him as well as he could. Cæsar went on speaking wildly, gasping and stammering as he spoke: "I will not die yet. I am young and strong, and my father was old and weak. I can fight against the venom; I can fight against the devil. I cannot die now, with the world dandling in my hands. The antidote is sure. Will no one come? Must I perish here like a poisoned rat, I—Cæsar Borgia—and leave the smug Cardinal to chuckle as he boasts how he fooled me? Who betrayed me? Will no one come? Poison and antidote are fighting in my veins. I shall win; I shall win. God, I must win!"

Cæsar was a horrible sight to the eyes of the adoring Agapito, who clung to him and tried to murmur words of consolation, words of encourage-

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ment. The secretary did not know for sure what had happened, but the thing was not difficult to divine, and Cæsar's choking utterances made certain the one fearful fact that the man of men was in peril of his life. A cold sweat oozed from his flesh; his face was all pinched and twisted with the pain he endured and the mighty efforts he made to combat his agony; he shivered as if he were stricken with the palsy; his eyes, all bloodshot, glared horribly; his mouth gaped like the mouth of a wounded beast, and he boggled and gobbled over his words with a horrible noise; he seemed in a few moments to have grown wofully old. Agapito, beholding, felt as if the solid world had suddenly been withered into insignificance about him; he could not realize what was happening; surely, his terrified senses protested, surely it was not conceivable that such a misfortune could fall on Cæsar Borgia and obliterate the glory of Rome.

At this moment the fleetest of the pages returned, followed hotfoot by a breathless physician. To him Cæsar turned, twisting himself in the arms of the clinging Agapito, and spoke in a hoarse, awful voice:

"I am poisoned," he groaned. "I have taken an antidote, somewhat late. Save me! save me! Do what you will, but save me! You must save me!"

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Then, with an ugly foam about his mouth and an ugly gurgling in his throat, he that believed himself the hope of Rome wrenched himself free from the embrace of Agapito and fell in a heap at the feet of the terrified physician.



**BOOK IV**

**AN EVENING IN THE LIFE OF CÆSAR  
BORGIA**



## I

### CAESAR IS ILL

NEVER, perhaps, since the dreadful ides of March when the daggers of the assassins stabbed Cæsar in the capitol had Rome been so agitated as on the evening of that day when rumor carried through the city the tidings that the second Cæsar was dying, and that the Pontiff, Alexander Borgia, was dead. The first rumors, indeed, were met either with sceptical laughter or with wary suspicion. The amazing, incredible story might very well be blown abroad by the Borgias for sinister purposes of their own. They might hope thereby, through their spies reading on men's faces and hearing in men's voices the joy such news would be sure to cause, to gain the means to snare and strike down enemies hitherto unsuspected by them. But as the minutes swelled into hours the doubtings dwindled, for the rumors grew too persistent and too circumstantial to be disbelieved or denied. Rovere knew the truth, and Rovere was too upright a man to keep the truth to himself when it was to his advantage to give it currency. Sure



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emissaries were despatched by him to all the discontented and all the distressed, carrying assurances of the calamity that had suddenly come upon the house of Borgia, and urging alertness to take advantage of the astounding chance. The adherents of the Spanish house, with the best will in the world to keep the matter silent, at least for a breathing-while, which might allow them to rally forces against inevitable menace, found themselves baffled by the swiftness with which the news spread and the joyful alacrity with which it was credited. Pope Alexander was dead; that was certain. Cæsar Borgia was reported dying; that, it seemed, was not so certain. But at least it was not to be gainsaid, even by those whose interest prompted incredulity, that Cæsar Borgia was stricken with a strange illness against which it seemed unlikely that even his renowned strength could struggle. Horrible stories were whispered behind lifted hands into eager ears of the hideous nature of the malady that was ravaging the body of the great Borgia and transforming him, so people said, from the comeliest prince in Christendom into a pitiable being more unlovely than a leper.

At first, indeed, Rome and the Romans could not realize that the two-edged stroke of a single day and hour had deprived the Borgias of their head and crippled to impotence a man that was their heart and hand. But when Rome and the Romans did

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realize that this miraculous thing was the very truth, then the Romans that hated the Borgias—and of such were the most of the Romans—were swollen with a curious exultation that found vent in fierce songs, fierce laughter, fierce clamor. Through every gate of Rome, along every road that led north, south, east, and west, the news of the doom that had come upon the Borgias travelled upon the wings of the wind, bringing with it, wherever it halted, joy to the enemies of Cæsar and consternation to his friends. The tidings meant to most the dawn of a new age. Yesterday Cæsar was the strongest man in Italy, and no man bold enough to defy him with any hope of success. To-day, Cæsar was helpless, Cæsar was harmless, and men that had lain hidden an age-long time for the fear of him, crept out of their darkness into the sunlight and aired their naked treason unafraid. Yesterday men went cowed, with bent heads and hushed voices, starting at shadows. To-day hands reached for swords that had been abandoned, and men's voices cried aloud the war-cries they had never hoped again to shout. If such were the fruits of a day, what, then, might to-morrow bring? To-morrow came and came again, and yet again, and brought an answer to their hearts' content, and with every successive day the great waves of rebellion against the Borgian tyranny rose higher and stronger and angrier, rolling from all parts of

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Italy toward Rome. As each day passed and saw mutiny stiffening into insurrection and revolt growing into revolution, it saw, too, that Cæsar spoke no word and made no sign and struck no stroke. It saw that, so far as thwarting in any fashion the plans of his enemies was concerned, Cæsar might as well, indeed, have ceased to be. And so, all over Italy the storm of hatred against Cæsar swelled to a tempest, and the great sovereignty that Cæsar had constructed with so much care, so much statecraft, so much cunning, so much cruelty, and so much bloodshed was reeling to its pitiful fall. And still Cæsar lay upon his sick-bed weaker than a woman, more helpless than a child, while the Italy of his dreams fell in ruins about him.

As soon as Agapito had realized from the words of Cæsar, and from the result of the consultation of his physician, of the peril in which Cæsar lay, he did all that he could to lessen the peril and to save his master's life. Grasping instantly the dangers of the situation, he had the sick man conducted speedily and secretly from the Vatican, where it might have been hard to defend him from his enemies, to the castle of St. Angelo, which was strong enough to stand a formal siege, and which even a small body of fighting-men could hold for long enough against great odds. The castle was well garrisoned, well provisioned, well provided with the muniments of war. Inside its almost

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impregnable walls Cæsar might lie in safety and make his own terms with his adversaries, for Agapito was shrewd enough to know that those adversaries would not neglect the startling and unexpected chance that fortune gave them, and he knew, too, what measure of mercy Cæsar might expect from them, if once they held their great enemy in their power. So it came to pass that when Rome and the Romans realized that the incredible news was very credible, and when in all the Roman streets Roman voices were shrieking for Cæsar's life, and Roman hands were brandishing weapons whose butt was Cæsar's body, Cæsar lay behind the walls that had been built by Hadrian, safe from the Roman hatred, and the groans and curses of the baffled Romans, balked of their immediate revenge, could not trouble his sick-bed.

If the Romans could not lay their hands upon Cæsar, they might at least, and they did, use those hands to Cæsar's injury. The gates of Rome were opened wide to exiled lords and rallied adversaries, all manner of mutineers. Faces that had not been seen in Rome for many a long day were now familiar in the Roman streets, and in every place where men gathered together to voice their hatred of Cæsar and to rejoice over the downfall of his house some one of the banished Orsini was sure to be found, more vehement than all the others in expression of hate and more cunning in plan to make its hatred

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effective. That hatred was not so headstrong as to waste itself in vain assault upon the castle of St. Angelo. The spirit of mischief that was abroad in Rome urged men to noisy invective and blatant conspiracy, but it did not tempt them to wreak their strength upon that mighty fortress. The mass of Cæsar's enemies wished him ill very heartily, but did not wish to risk their own safety lightly. Cæsar behind St. Angelo's walls was hard to get at. There was, besides, another reason why Cæsar should for the moment be left alone.

For while Cæsar was slowly fighting his way back to strength and sanity, overthrowing with his desperate efforts the shadowy enemies that wrestled with him in his bed, the Roman people were occupied with a new excitement.

Cæsar was sick. That was old news, had been old news these many days. Alexander was dead. That was older news. Alexander, the dead and detested, was wellnigh forgotten. What interested the Roman people now, when they clearly understood that they could by no means get at Cæsar in his stronghold of St. Angelo and drag him out and do him to death, was that a successor had to be found for the wellnigh forgotten Alexander. In the Vatican the cardinals had been gathered together, had been shut into the hall and apartments reserved for them, and the wonderful assemblage which was known to the world as a conclave had been called

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into existence. Every day from all parts of Rome eager and vehement crowds had streamed to the great space in front of the Vatican, choking it with angry, excited human beings whose gaze was eagerly fixed upon the sacred edifice. All eyes were fixed upon the Vatican, all men and women in that monstrous assemblage addressed their gaze either to the bricked-up window in the wall of the building or to the chimney beyond, as their hopes or fears were strongest. And every day for many days a small column of smoke rose from the chimney and floated into the still, hot air, dissipating in small, transparent wisps. This meant that the cardinals had failed to vote in a majority for any candidate, and that Rome was still without a pope. As the last of the little flakes of gray cloud seemed to wither in the fierceness of the shimmering heat, an angry groan would break from the waiting assembly, and the very foundations of Rome seemed to shake with the heavy movement of departing feet. Again, on the next day, the same crowd assembled with the same impatience that waxed again into even fiercer vociferations of protesting indignation, as for yet another time the gray smoke curled lazily into the air and, lazily fading into the distance, proclaimed the renewed failure of the conclave's purpose.

Many intrigues were at work in Rome during those hours. Had Cæsar been on his feet, had Cæsar been alert, those processes might have been suc-

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cessfully repeated which were generally believed to have helped to secure for his father the Triple Crown and the command of the Double Keys. But Cæsar was helpless, and those that were devoted to him, and that fought for him as best they could inside and outside St. Angelo, were skillless without his inspiration, were as men that combated in the dark. To Cardinal Rovere, on the other hand, no lesson of that earlier conclave had been lost. He remembered well how bribes and promises had been conveyed to wavering cardinals inside the bodies of fat fowls transmitted to the Vatican for their daily meals. If a Borgia could promise in those past years, when the Borgias were rich and powerful, a Rovere could promise now when the fortune of the Borgias seemed at its last gasp. And so Rovere, through his instrument, employed all the artifices and tricks and machinations that were available to win to his side man after man of the vacillating cardinals. The BORGIAN candidate, the Cardinal Piccolomini, was not very popular, had little to promise, and, in the absence of a stubborn BORGIAN backing, proved a somewhat helpless figure. The adherents of Borgia in the city might be rich in promises, but they were rich in little else. They had no heavy carts laden with gold to send this way and that way. They had no formal gifts of land duly signed and sealed to insert into the plump bosoms of dressed pullets. They had even no

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threats to make that seemed worth consideration, for the only power whose existence held the Borgia faction together was, so many men believed, and most men hoped in Rome, dying in St. Angelo.

From the moment when the Cardinal Rovere had quitted the gardens of the Vatican with the news of the death of Alexander VI. ringing in his ears and the sight of Cæsar Borgia's distorted, raging face haunting his memory, that astute ecclesiastic and subtle politician had steadily pushed an emphatic propaganda. The moment was the very moment for Rovere, a cautious, prudent man, who never pitted himself against his superiors or even against his equals, but who now found himself in the great arena of ecclesiastical politics faced by no rival worthy of the slightest consideration.

Rovere had always known himself a strong man waiting upon chance. Now chance had served him well, and he found himself a strong man threatened, but scarcely menaced, by weak opponents. It was as if some gladiator of old time, waiting and dreading his call to descend into the arena and match his strength against some mountain bear or Libyan lion, was suddenly to learn, as he entered the circus, that his only antagonist was a jackal; for the excellent member of the Piccolomini household, who would have been indeed formidable if he had been bolstered up by the backing of a brisk and belligerent Cæsar, was of little or no account when left to



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himself. Rovere, on the other hand, who might have declined all competition in the face of a living Borgia interest, was, in the absence of that Borgia interest, a man of influence and a man of power, who worked his propaganda steadily, cunningly, unceasingly. In a moment, as it were, he had become from a man of no importance a man of the very first importance, and the diplomatic and the discreet rallied to his side with astonishing celerity. He was like some invader who lands almost alone upon a country presumably hostile and finds the inhabitants gathering round him almost to a man. His wealth, which he had hitherto kept jealously to himself, he now employed with insidious freedom to buy friendship, interest, alliance. Many who would have cared nothing for him a fortnight earlier now saw, and rightly saw, that under the existing condition of things he was the coming man. Cæsar might recover, truly; every day the reports of the physicians grew more favorable, and were duly bruited abroad, but if the Cardinal Rovere were made pope before Cæsar could struggle from his bed there was little to fear from those who had supported Rovere. With their man on the chair of St. Peter they felt that they could defy Cæsar, whose fortunes, indeed, seemed already to be broken.

But a conclave is always a slow, serious, and difficult business. There are many questions to be considered, many elements of strife to be eliminated,

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many warring factions to be silenced or reconciled, before it is possible for a new name to be added to the Golden Roll of Popes and to be proclaimed to the City and the World. Many times already had a pale-gray spiral of smoke risen from the roof of the Vatican and told to the expectant Romans, staring from below, that the process of voting had proved a failure and that the voting-papers were being burned to ashes in the brazier prepared for such disasters.

Thus it was that the friends of the house of Borgia depended upon the health of one man, who lay little at ease in the Mole of Hadrian, and upon the voices of many men gathered together within the consecrated walls of the Vatican; and all this while men came riding, armed and angry, from all parts of Italy toward Rome, with hatred of the Borgias in their hearts and denunciation of the Borgias on their lips, and the streets of Rome flooded and eddied with furious crowds that cursed the name of Cæsar. On every hand strongholds that had been Cæsar's ceased to be Cæsar's, and fair towns that had flown the Borgian banner now flew the flag of other captains, and the red bull on the yellow field was razed from stately palaces, and within the castle of St. Angelo the fighting-men ate and drank and gambled and looked to their weapons, and were assured by Messer Agapito da Amalia that the Mole of Hadrian was not to be taken by the blusterers of Rome.

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Yet there came a moment in that time of strain and stress when it seemed as if Cæsar's star were about to shine again with undiminished radiance in the heaven of his success. News was carried to him on his sick-bed that the hardly to be hoped for had come to pass and that Cardinal Piccolomini had been chosen and had taken the title of Pius III. This news, which exhilarated Cæsar to such a degree that from that moment his strength to resist his sickness seemed to increase hourly, this news that cheered all Cæsar's people in the castle of St. Angelo and such supporters as were still true to him outside, this news came like the tidings of a terrible misfortune to Cæsar's enemies. The chief indeed of these, the astute Rovere, took the stroke with his usual show of composure, affected humility rather than gloom, and waited, apparently impassive, upon events. But others in the fellowship of Cæsar's enemies were not so politic. All the mutinous captains, all the revengeful exiles, that had believed their hour of triumph had come with one Borgia dead and another seemingly dying, were troubled now by a terror that rivalled their former exultation. Was it, indeed, true, they seemed to ask one another with pale faces, that nothing could strive successfully against the luck of the Borgias, and that whatever might happen in the chaos of Roman laws and the welter of Roman politics the one thing certain must be the success of Cæsar. Men that had

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ridden desperately to Rome when the tidings came of the death of the Pope and the sickness of his son, eager to proclaim themselves the foes of Cæsar, now bethought themselves of their horses again, and saw to their biting and bridling and the shoeing of their hoofs, and made sure that the stable-door was easy to open, so that they might be ready at a moment's notice to ride out of Rome as hotly as they had ridden in, and make the best of their way to some place where the vengeance of Cæsar might not be able to overtake them. Mobs that raged and raved against Cæsar, too, were quieter now, for who could tell but that at any moment Cæsar, the all-powerful, might issue forth from the castle of St. Angelo at the head of his men and sluice the kennels of Rome with hostile blood.

Indeed, such thoughts were in the mind of Cæsar as he daily mended his strength and hourly yearned for the moment when he might put on his fighting-gear and go into the Roman air and take vengeance upon those who had dared to find their opportunity in his weakness. Though he was not yet well enough to be allowed to do any active work, or, indeed, to have any prolonged talk with his secretary, Agapito, he found a solace for his pains in reflecting on the discomfiture of his opponents. So all seemed well with him again for a little space of days, and then came a fresh catastrophe. His Pope, his Piccolomini, did not wear his name of Pius for a

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month of days. A delicate man, he sickened suddenly, suddenly died, and, lo! there was all the battle of the conclave to be fought over again and a new pope to be selected. Agapito, acting for Cæsar, did his desperate best to meet the fresh emergency, pulled the strings of his schemes as well as a man could that was penned in St. Angelo. Rovere, on his side, mightily encouraged by this fresh blow to Cæsar's fortunes, shook off his assumed sloth and renewed his efforts with an enthusiasm for his own interest and ambitions, quickened by the new opportunity and an experience derived from the lessons of the former struggle. The Cæsarean candidate, the French cardinal de Rohan, the best to be had at the moment, did not seem to Rovere a very formidable antagonist, and he played his game with a steady mind and a steady hand, taking every advantage, neglecting never a chance. If he had been crafty, calculating, and diplomatic in his machinations before, his wariness, his carefulness were now intensified. Cæsar had won a round in the great struggle; Cæsar was admitted, by those most reluctant to admit so much, to be mending in health, to be recovering from the effects of the drench that had been brewed for Rovere's entrails. If Cæsar were to win this second round, Rovere would indeed feel that all was lost. And so, thanking Heaven that a blessed mistake nailed Cæsar to a sick-bed, Rovere spun his schemes till their fine-drawn web

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enmeshed all Rome, and ever as he worked he wore the same air of patient abnegation and humility.

Thus while Cæsar Borgia was trying to draw breath in the castle of St. Angelo, and his physicians were exhausting all the resources of their art to keep the threatened flame of life quick in his body, his destiny was for the second time no less at issue in the Vatican. In the Vatican were again assembled all the great cardinals of the Church, gathered together in solemn conclave for the election of a new pope to succeed Pius the third. Once again to every cardinal his cell had been duly apportioned; for every cardinal due arrangements had been made for provision of meat and drink; in the hands of every cardinal rested, as it were, a portion of the fate of Cæsar Borgia. Though Cæsar Borgia had lost his greatest ally in the death of his father, he would do something to lessen the gravity of that loss if he succeeded in getting for a second time a pope of his own party and of his own choosing from the votes of the conclave.

Unhappily for Cæsar, he was unable to do anything for himself save struggle with all the energy of his indomitable nature against his malady, and his interests had to be served by lesser men. These, with all their zeal for Cæsar, partly for his own sake and partly for their own, for they depended on his fortunes, strove their best to further his interests; but they had neither the genius nor the daring

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which would have enabled Cæsar to grapple with the tragic situation and twist it into comedy. All the world knew who was Cæsar's candidate for the papacy. The Cardinal de Rohan was a somewhat fragile, very clever ecclesiastic, profoundly imbued with respect for the rich-blooded strength of the Borgias, and entirely ready to be their mouthpiece. But while there might have been no serious opposition to Cardinal de Rohan possible had Cæsar been about and alert, the situation was entirely changed when Cæsar lay shackled and for so long almost powerless. It was already generally known throughout Rome and, beyond Rome, throughout Italy that Cardinal Rovere considered himself, or perhaps it would be more proper to say, weighing duly the Cardinal's well-known humility, that Cardinal Rovere was considered to be by many strenuous zealots to be the ideal man for the throne of St. Peter.

Never was there a case in the history of Rome when it was more difficult, not to say impossible, to predict the result of a conclave. The mighty influence of the Borgias would, under ordinary circumstances, have rendered speculation unnecessary; it would have been taken for granted that what the Borgias wished the conclave would do. But the power of the Borgias now was, if not absolutely in the dust, certainly wofully dusty and discredited. A great Borgia was dead; the greater

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Borgia was little more than alive. The new Cæsa-rean Pope had passed away like a breath. In consequence, free play was given to all manner of passions, greeds, desires, and influence which would have been stifled or frightened into subservience if the greater Borgia had been fit for his business.



## II

### IN ST. ANGELO

ON a certain evening of this troubled time, Messer Agapito sat writing at a table in a stately room in the castle of St. Angelo, a room that was richly colored, that was hung with tapestry, a room that looked as cheerful and as brilliant as was possible for a chamber in what was practically a beleaguered fortress. The great open window with the balcony looked down on the open space beneath and the yellow Tiber beyond. Hard by the window a full-length portrait of the dead Pope, Alexander VI., frowned in fierce magnificence from a heavily carved and gilded frame. Close to where Messer Agapito sat and wrote, a little chapel that seemed to have been dug out of the thickness of the wall, and that was separated from the rest of the room by a gilded iron grating, recalled the writer when he glanced at it to thoughts which, if not exactly religious, were intimately associated with religious matters. At one side of the room the great door, that could be secured by heavy iron bolts, gave egress and ingress from the corridor that led

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to the stairway that led, in its turn, to the outer world.

Messer Agapito, being busier than he had ever been, wrote faster than he had ever written. He was engaged now, as he had been engaged for long enough, upon the great history of his master, which was, in the first place, to make the name of Cæsar Borgia immortal, and in the second place to confer some portion of immortality upon Messer Agapito da Amalia. And the events of the last few weeks had been so momentous and so terrible that the chronicler found it necessary to record them at a white heat of speed. After writing at a great rate for a few moments, Agapito paused with a sigh and let his pen fall upon the table as he bent over his manuscript and reread the words he had written. It all seemed to him very beautiful; it was all well balanced, grave, calm. It had, he thought, something of the sombre touch of Tacitus coupled with the more provincial picturesqueness of Livius. He flattered himself as he overlooked his now flowing and now laconic periods that Latin grandeur had survived the Latin masters. "Surely," he said to himself, "when the years to be shall read my history of this great prince they must applaud the man who made the book, as well as the man who held the soldier's sword, the man that recorded as well as the man that gained the fame that fills the story." As he mused thus, wrapped in the sense of

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a well-deserved fame and happily unconscious of a possible oblivion, he was suddenly disturbed in his reverie by the entrance of a servant. Agapito turned toward the intruder with a fretful look of distressed authorship on his face.

“Well?” he asked, peevishly. “What now?”

The servant bowed respectfully, informing him that an envoy from the Governor of Rome wished to have speech with him. There was no resisting this application. The Governor of Rome was an important person, who had at one time been a most unquestioning creature of Cæsar’s, but in these times of change and drift and treason it was very hard to say what any man’s opinions might be from one day to the next. In any case, it was clear to Agapito that he must receive the Governor’s envoy, and he told the servant to admit him. As he sat and waited for the envoy he considered the situation for the hundredth time, and found no comfort in it. Cæsar seemed as defenceless against the hatred of his enemies as a spent rat in an angle. All Italy bristled with hostile swords. Little more than a month ago Cæsar was the greatest of the great. Now he lay sick in St. Angelo, seemingly as helpless and as hopeless as the least among the little, thanks to the venom of the cunning Cardinal, for it was now an established article in Agapito’s creed, and the creed of those that still rallied to Borgia, that Cæsar had been injured and his father killed by poison

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deliberately administered by the Cardinal Rovere. This was a convenient argument to uphold, for while it admitted what indeed was undeniable, that poisoned wine had been poured at Cæsar's banquet, it ingeniously threw the responsibility for the presence of that poisoned wine upon the guest, and not upon the host.

Agapito looked drearily at the long list of names before him, the names of those that were supporting the league of the Orsini and threatening to flush Borgiaism out of Rome as a strong rain flushes the sluices. Yet in the presence of these perils and menaces Agapito felt some little flame of comfort in his heart, and that flame was conveyed by the thought that though all this host of rebels had come together to dethrone Cæsar from his greatness, and reduce his empire to a petty looking on, Cæsar still lived and still was bland and imperturbable in the face of danger.

Agapito's thoughts were interrupted by the entry of the envoy from the Governor of Rome, an envoy who proved, somewhat to Agapito's astonishment, to be none other than Messer Ugo da Rovere, now more flagrantly foppish, more aggressively insolent, than ever in this hour of the exaltation of his house.

Agapito saluted him ironically. "I am your worship's servant," he said. "Who made you a person of importance?"

Ugo smiled a condescending smile. "It is not

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surprising," he said, "that I should now be a person of importance. If the conclave decides according to our wishes, my uncle will be Pope."

"Pigs may fly," Agapito commented, mockingly, "but they are not likely birds. The conclave that is to give a new pope to the city and the world surely will not choose the murder-monger Cardinal Rovere for heir to Alexander Borgia. I think you will find, Messer Ugo, that our man, our de Rohan, will win the day."

Ugo laughed fatuously. "I have not come here," he said, "to discuss high politics with a secretary. I have come to speak with Cæsar."

"That," said Agapito, dryly, "shall be as Cæsar pleases."

Ugo looked at him cunningly. "Is Cæsar alive?" he asked; for it was already beginning to be an opinion deserving of some credence among the adherents of Rovere and Cæsar's other enemies that Cæsar had ceased to live, and that his partisans were keeping up the pretext of his continued existence for purposes of their own, in order that their desperate purposes might wear the authority and influence of his name.

"Cæsar is alive," Agapito answered, quietly.

Ugo grinned incredulity. "Men whispered he was dead," he said.

Agapito eyed him disdainfully. "Is it likely," he asked, "that Cæsar could die and his death

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make so little stir? I tell you that Cæsar lives, in spite of the poison of his enemies. He has suffered, but he lives; his hair is gray, but he lives; his face is white, but he lives; and you will find that when the time comes for him to face his enemies he will bear himself majestically."

Ugo took no notice of this suggestion. "If Cæsar lives," he said, "then Rome, through my voice, would speak with Cæsar."

"Rome!" Agapito echoed, scornfully. "Cæsar is Rome, Cæsar is Italy. Who are you that you should speak of Rome?"

"I speak," said Ugo, with the courage that such men find in the presence of fallen fortunes—"I speak for the Governor of Rome, who is my uncle's very good friend, but who, none the less, wishes well to Cæsar, and therefore urges him that he should incontinently leave the castle of St. Angelo and Rome itself; for he thinks, and I think—indeed, we all think—that it is most improper that any man should stay in the Eternal City at the head of a household under arms while the conclave is assembled for the purpose of electing a pope."

"You speak very glibly of Cæsar's going," Agapito said; "but Cæsar's doors are choked up with all the kites, vultures, and other unclean birds that have gathered together against him. If you will clean Rome of these, Cæsar may see fit to change his lodgings."

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"I can promise you," Ugo said, pompously, "that no one in Rome will do anything to hinder Cæsar's departure from the city."

Agapito laughed bitterly. "You are brisk to promise," he said, "but can you speak for every Orsini that swells your legion? Can you swear that no traitor's hand will raise a dagger against Cæsar's sacred person?"

Agapito knew very well, and knew that his visitor knew very well, that if Cæsar once quitted the shelter of the castle of St. Angelo he would never be allowed to leave Rome alive. He knew, too, that no pledge of protection, from whatever quarter it came, would be honored by the men whose fortunes depended on the death of Cæsar. So he smiled his scorn of Ugo's advice.

Ugo frowned. "Am I to understand," he said, "that Cæsar stays in Rome?"

"You may understand as much," Agapito answered. "Cæsar stays in Rome. Cæsar stays in St. Angelo."

"Then," said Ugo, "I formally warn you that the Governor of Rome washes his hands free from all responsibility for what will happen, since Cæsar chooses to beard the law."

"Tell the Governor," said Agapito, coldly, "not to trouble himself about the law, for Cæsar is the law to Cæsar, to Rome, to Italy. Good-day."

Ugo shook his head at him reproachfully. "You

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are Cæsar's enemy," he said, "and not Cæsar's friend."

Agapito shrugged his shoulders and turned his back upon him. Ugo quitted the room. Agapito sighed and returned to his work.

"How pygmies hate a Titan," he murmured to himself, and went over again the long list of dreary facts that confronted him. He was drawing up a paper to submit to Cæsar, and he had barely finished it when a sound behind him caused him to rise to his feet, and he saw that Cæsar had entered the room, supported by two of his physicians.



### III

#### YOUR MAGNIFICENCY HAS LOST EVERYTHING

**A**GAPITO sprang to meet him. "My dear lord!" he cried.

The change that had taken place in Cæsar Borgia since the day when he had feasted in the gardens of the Vatican was indeed melancholy. The timely use of the antidote and his own great physical strength and will had enabled him to counteract the deadliest effect of the potion, but, if the poison had left him his life, it had worked fearful havoc upon his body. A premature and terrible old age seemed to have fallen upon him; his handsome face was wasted and stained and ravaged; his scanty hairs were streaked with white; his frame was shrunken and bowed; his livid skin hideously blotched. He was no more than the tragic wreck of a splendid creature. But his marred face was still firm with the old determination, and his eyes were still bright and fierce with the old courage and the old resolve.

Agapito kissed his hand. "How is your health?" he asked.

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"Why, I am well," Cæsar answered, cheerfully. "I can use my feet; I can shut and open my fingers, somewhat stiffly, it is true; I can draw my breath with some ease." He motioned a dismissal to the physicians, who withdrew, and Cæsar, with the aid of Agapito, placed himself in a chair. He looked at Agapito with something of his old playfulness. "I think," he said, "that I am greater than ever, seeing that I have been able successfully to combat so powerful a poison."

He had been going to speak of the potion that had so ruined him as his own proper poison, but he changed the words in time. If Agapito preferred to believe or to pretend to believe that Cæsar was the victim of the malice and treachery of Cardinal Rovere, it was as well to encourage that belief with every show of acquiescence. It was a belief that would give Cæsar a good excuse for making short work of Rovere if a return of his old luck put the Cardinal into his power.

Cæsar's own belief was that the hand which had struck him down was the hand of Lavinella guiding the hand of Michelotto. When he learned, as soon as he was strong enough to ask questions and be answered, that Michelotto had disappeared, he knew the name of his assassin, but he guessed that Michelotto had done his deed at the instigation of the woman whom Cæsar had betrayed. Having made up his mind on this matter, Cæsar thought

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no more about it. The mischief was done; both Michelotto and Lavinella were for the hour out of reach of his revenge; he wasted no energy upon them.

Now he rose restlessly and moved slowly across the floor toward the window looking out in the direction of the Vatican. "When," he said, wearily, "will these plotting cardinals play my Pope? With Rohan for Pontiff I shall rule the world again."

Agapito called to him in a tremor of fear. "Is your magnificence wise to watch so long at that window? If some enemy spied you, and that enemy carried an arquebus, those damnable instruments carry so far that you would be no long mark."

Cæsar shrugged his shoulders. "Ut puto Deus fio. I begin to think I am immortal, Messer Agapito. When I think that I live still, after drinking that poison, I thank Heaven for its best miracle."

Agapito still protested. "It were not well to depend on a second miracle. Some rogue might fire with a silver bullet. Such cannot miss, they say. Why wait at the window?"

But Cæsar was not to be lured from his position. "Because I cannot leave it. I fix my eyes on the Vatican; I think of those solemn fellows in conclave, and I wish to hurl my wishes at them across the gulf of air and compel them to vote for my Cardinal. If I were not cooped up in this castle I should feel sure enough."

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"But," said Agapito, "while your magnificence is besieged here, who shall say what is brewing yonder?"

Cæsar sighed. "I am hot for a sortie. I am eager to do something. It is strange, Agapito, that in all my calculations, in all my provisions of what might arise to interfere with my plans, I never thought of the possibility that my father and I should be compelled at the self-same moment to leave the game. Everything else I was prepared for, every combination of our enemies, every plan, every ruse, every move—everything save the chance that there should be no Borgia left to make head against traitors. It makes me mad to think that I am cooped up here while those cardinals yonder are remoulding the world. I am for a sword and a sally."

"That were madness," Agapito protested. "Rome is for the moment against your magnificence. You are safe enough here; they cannot get at you. If the conclave chooses your Pope, all will be well; and if they do not, you can make terms while you hold this castle."

Cæsar answered cheerfully: "They will choose my Pope—never vex your beard about that. What are you holding there?"

Agapito looked gloomily at the piece of paper he had taken from the table. This was the first day he believed Cæsar strong enough to learn the worst.

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"I have here," he said, soberly, "a little map of your magnificence's strongholds—fortresses, towns."

"Let me see it," Cæsar said.

Agapito rose and placed the paper in Cæsar's hand. "I have marked with a cross the places your magnificence has lost in these late warrings."

Cæsar, glancing at the paper, looked up in surprise. "The map is all crosses!"

Agapito sighed. "Your magnificence has lost everything."

"Everything?" Cæsar echoed.

"Everything," Agapito repeated — "except this castle and your hopes yonder."

Cæsar spoke proudly: "And my faith in myself, my trust in my lucky star."

Agapito shook his head. "I am no star-gazer. I walk this planet warily. I wish your magnificence were as circumspect."

Cæsar spoke passionately: "To the devil with circumspection! My battle-cry is 'Forward!'—my steed is the Winged Victory; I draw new ardors from her breasts of snow." He turned again to the window and looked anxiously at the distant Vatican. "In God's name!" he cried, "will they never be done pope-making?"

Agapito sighed. "Three times the smoke of failure has wavered from the roof. Many passions, hates, betrayals rage in that crater."

Cæsar turned to him with burning eyes. "Let

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them give me my choice. If my man wear the Ring of the Fisherman, if my man hold the Double Keys, then all that's lost is won again, and my enemies have laughed too soon. O God, Agapito, to think that I have been sweating in death's bed all these days and nights, a chained Titan watching the ruin of his world! For every spotted hour of that agony I would have given a clean year of life! Think of it! To be forced to lie bed-ridden, fever-drenched, helpless, while the time was calling to arms! I died forty deaths in that sickness."

At that moment a servant entered the room and addressed Cæsar: "A Sister of the Fellowship of Pity is at the gate and prays for audience."

Cæsar seemed surprised. "A Sister of the Fellowship of Pity! Why, they wait on death-beds, and I am newly quick! She comes too late."

"Shall I bid her be gone?" the servant asked.

Agapito looked thoughtfully at Cæsar. "There may be some meaning in it. A woman can do no harm."

Cæsar smiled at him. "And you call yourself a philosopher! Well, admit her."

The servant departed. Agapito added, thoughtfully: "In our present pass a woman can do us no harm."

Cæsar smiled again. "From the days of Eve, from the days of Helen, from the days of Cleo-

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patra, to the day of our sweet sister Lucrezia, history gives you the lie, wiseacre."

The servant returned, heralding a woman clad in the black robe and veil of a Sister of the Fellowship of Pity. The servant left the room, and the woman remained standing, looking at Cæsar. Nothing of her face could be seen.

Cæsar addressed her: "Be welcome, sister. What is your business with me?"

The woman pointed to Agapito.

Cæsar understood. "Your business is private? Leave me, friend Agapito."

Agapito protested: "Is it wise?"

Cæsar laughed anew. "In our present pass a woman can do us no harm."

Agapito recognized the humor which turned his words against himself. "Touched!" he said, and left Cæsar alone with the woman.

Cæsar spoke to her: "Your trade is with the dying. There are none here at the point of death."

The woman answered, slowly: "Are you so sure, Cæsar?" Then she drew back her veil, and Cæsar looked upon the face of Lavinella.

## IV

### OMNIPOTENT CAESAR

**I**F Messer Agapito da Amalia cherished a dislike to Lavinella, a dislike not unnatural, perhaps, considering his position and point of view, and if he allowed this dislike so far to influence him as to keep her out of his chronicle of the illustrious Cæsar Borgia, at least he proved somewhat more generous in his private diary. In that diary he fully and frankly exonerates her from the accusation which he records—that she was an accomplice in the poisoning of Cæsar Borgia. Where he got his information from we do not know. It may be that at some later time he had speech with Pandolfo Orsini, but what he tells is noteworthy. After Cæsar had delivered Lavinella to her former guardian, Pandolfo took her with him to a small house in an obscure part of Rome. There, without a word, he showed her into a room, and there he waited for the promised visit of Michelotto. He had not to wait long. Michelotto came soon, bringing with him the welcomest news to the ears of an Orsini—that Alexander Borgia was dead, and that Cæsar Borgia



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was dying, for so at the moment Michelotto believed him to be. Michelotto swore, with cheerful perjury, that the poisoning had been planned by Lavinella; that she, being in Cæsar's secrets, had changed the vessels of wine, and had thus, after so long a time, honorably fulfilled the purpose for which she had been sold into Cæsar's house. Pandolfo, listening, believed, or was content to believe. There was nothing, after all, incredible in Michelotto's story. It was not an easy task for a woman, whose purpose was discovered from the first, to kill Cæsar Borgia, and the mission was surely the more difficult when the woman had before been Cæsar Borgia's lover. It was quite in keeping with the patience of any offshoot of the Orsini stock to wait three years not merely for the chance for revenge, but for the best chance of revenge; for, as Michelotto pointed out, and Pandolfo agreed, there could not have been a more magnificent moment for revenge than when Cæsar Borgia believed himself about to be rid of his greatest enemy. Very possibly something of an old-time tenderness for the beautiful girl who had been his ward, and whom the signs of heaven had prophesied to be the doom of the Borgias, prompted Pandolfo Orsini to credence in the tale told by Michelotto; at least, it is certain that Pandolfo released the girl from her captivity; and though he refused to hold any unnecessary intercourse with her or to hearken to any speech

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of hers, he told her that he had judged her case and had decided upon her fate. His decision was that she should enter the Sisterhood of the Fellowship of Pity. Lavinella made no objection, raised no protest. Her life was ruined, and she was content to end it in that famous fellowship. She saw, without understanding why, that for some reason Pandolfo's enmity had changed to pity and even to respect, but she was too weary of the world to question curiously whatever might happen, and she obeyed Pandolfo in silence. In the Fellowship of Pity she found peace; in the Fellowship of Pity she found employment for her weary body and wounded spirit; in the Fellowship of Pity she strove to forget that she had ever been the mistress of Cæsar Borgia, strove to ignore the rumors that filled Rome of Cæsar's struggles for life and for command of the papacy.

On a certain day there came to her in her convent a messenger whom she did not know, but who seemed to be possessed of much authority, summoning her services to a sick-bed. She was told to go with this messenger. She went unquestioning, and in the place to which she was conducted she found Michelotto. Michelotto bade her go to the castle of St. Angelo and warn Cæsar that his danger was great, that the conclave was certain to declare against his candidate, and that his safety lay in flight by a secret way known to him. Lavinella

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was the more eager to obey because Michelotto professed much rough sympathy for the fate of the one who had been his loved master. She knew no more of what Michelotto had done on that fatal day to Cæsar than she knew what she was supposed to have done. She obeyed Michelotto's orders. She went to the castle of St. Angelo; she sought and gained admission, and presently stood face to face with Cæsar.

Cæsar showed no surprise, and addressed her coldly: "Lavinella, I thought you were dead."

Lavinella answered him: "You gave me to death, but Death was gentler than my lover, and held his hand awhile."

Cæsar fingered the dagger at his girdle. "Perhaps till now, Monna Lavinella."

Lavinella echoed him: "Perhaps till now."

Cæsar spoke to her with a calm voice. "You thought to kill me with the cunning change of the wine. But my star was stronger than your treason, and I live in spite of you."

Lavinella looked at him with wonder in her eyes and in her voice. "Alas, Cæsar, I know not what you say. What wine do you speak of? What change? And what has it to do with me?"

Cæsar laughed mockingly. "O wonderful air of innocence! One would not think, to look on your face, that you owe your life to such a knavish trick."

Lavinella still wondered. "What trick? I owe

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my life to the pity of my kinsfolk. When you gave me back to them they treated me kindly; I know not why. I thought they would kill me, but they did no more than place me in the Sisterhood of the Fellowship of Pity."

Cæsar spoke scornfully: "You talk glibly of the pity of the Orsini. They spared you because they knew you had slain my father, because you would have slain me, though in slaying me you slew Italy."

Lavinella answered passionately: "By the wounds of God, Alexander, do you think I could have hurt you?"

Cæsar drew his dagger. "At least, you shall not hurt me again."

Lavinella looked at him unalarmed. "Kill me if you please, but first let me warn you."

Cæsar sheathed his dagger. "What have you to say?"

Lavinella went on: "All Rome is mad against you. Your one chance is victory in the conclave. If you fail there—"

Cæsar interrupted her proudly: "I shall not fail."

Lavinella looked at him sadly, and saluted him, with tender irony: "Omnipotent Cæsar!" Then she added, sadly: "Be advised by me; do not hope when there is no hope."

As she spoke there arose a great clamor without and the noise of much shouting. Agapito came hurriedly into the room, trembling with excitement

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and gasping for breath. "My lord," he cried, huskily, as one that was choked with dust—"my lord, the voice of the conclave!"

Cæsar's calmness for a moment forsook him. "Speak! speak! speak!" he screamed.

Agapito, gasping for breath, answered: "The Cardinal Rovere has been chosen Pope."

"Liar!" Cæsar shrieked at him, and made as if he would have struck him.

Lavinella came between the two men and spoke with sad earnestness: "This is truth, Cæsar."

Cæsar dropped into a chair as if he had been struck down, and sat for a moment staring into vacancy, while his thin fingers clutched nervously at the arms of his chair.

Agapito addressed him nervously: "What next, my lord?"

Cæsar roused himself with a great effort, rose to his feet, spoke fiercely, eagerly: "Take a flag of truce, go to the new Pope, greet him in my name, and say that I demand the right to leave Rome in peace."

Agapito bowed. "I go, my lord," he said, and hurried from the room.

Cæsar turned to Lavinella. "You had better go with him," he counselled.

Lavinella appealed to him eagerly. "Be wise, my dear lord! Do not trust the new Pope! Fly from Rome while you can!"

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Cæsar's voice was hot with scorn as he answered: "A Borgia fly!"

Lavinella persisted: "The odds are overhuman. Fly, to return in triumph! Is there no hidden way from here to the Tiber?"

Cæsar frowned. "There is such a way, but I will not take it."

Again Lavinella entreated: "By the love I have for you, by the love you had for me—for you did love me once—by all your hope of glory yet to grow, go now before it is too late!"

Cæsar pointed to the portrait of Alexander VI. "Behind this picture there is a door that only opens from this side, and from that door a passage winding in the thickness of the wall to a masked postern and to Tiber edge. Only I know the trick of it. I have thought of that way since I came here, day and night, waiting on the worst, but the worst is not yet."

Lavinella implored him. "Use it, use it!" she cried, passionately.

Cæsar was firm in refusal; but even as he refused the sound of fierce voices came through the window from the place below, screaming: "Death to Cæsar Borgia!" The news that was good news to the hostile folk of Rome had spread as fire spreads over dried grass. The hatred of a thousand hearts was concentrated into that wild cry: "Death to Cæsar Borgia!"

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Lavinella looked significantly at Cæsar. "You hear them?" she asked. And again the cry rose to heaven: "Death to Cæsar Borgia!"

Cæsar went to the window and leaned far out, looking down upon the crowded space beneath and the roofs of the Rome that had been his plaything, engirdled by its fringe of green, and the sea of furious faces under him. "Delicate faces!" he said, mockingly.

The crowd below could not hear his voice, but it could see his form as it stood there upon the parapet, and it guessed his identity and hailed him with a roar of execration. All that a Roman mob could express of rage and hatred and rejoicing over a fallen foe was volleyed upward in that shout. "Death to Cæsar Borgia!" thundered in his ears.

Cæsar only laughed scornfully at their frenzy, but Lavinella caught him by the arm and drew him from the window. "Fly, Alexander!" she entreated. "In Heaven's name, fly!"

Cæsar looked at her with the light of battle on his face. "Why should I fly?" he said. "Because a rabble howls at me? With a hundred men at my heels I will sweep these fellows from Rome!"

Lavinella looked at him pityingly. "You could not do it," she said, "if you had twice ten hundred men. Your enemies are as thick as dust upon the Roman streets, and thousands of bloody hands beat at your gates and long to beat upon your breast."

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Cæsar was determined. "I will not fly!" he said.

Lavinella pleaded: "Fly, to return in triumph, I implore you! For the love I have for you, for the love you once had for me, fly before it is too late for flight!"

Cæsar answered, moodily, "I will not fly!"

Even as he uttered this resolve Agapito came hot-foot into the apartment. "Cæsar," he cried, "on my way I met Ugo da Rovere, the new Pope's nephew, who begs to see you. He says he is informed as to all the Pontiff's purposes."

Cæsar struck his clinched hand against the table. "The Pontiff!" he said, angrily. "Is Rovere Pope? Does the devil squat on Peter's chair? Well, I will fight the devil. Admit the Pope's nephew. But, still, carry my wishes—I mean, my humble entreaties—to the Pope."

Agapito saluted despairing, as the gladiators about to die saluted the imperial purple, and went out.

Cæsar turned to Lavinella and led her to the door of his room. "Wait in this room," he said. "Much depends upon what may happen at this interview. I will summon you when it is over."

Lavinella entered the room in silence, and Cæsar quickly closed the door and fastened it behind her. Then he went back and seated himself at the table, waiting. He had not long to wait.



## V

### THE END OF UGO

AGAPITO returned in a few moments with Ugo da Rovere, who advanced to Cæsar while Agapito withdrew. Cæsar seemed to lie huddled in his chair and to look up helplessly at the new-comer, a mere feeble wreck of vexed flesh.

Ugo feigned sympathy, though his mean heart rejoiced over the humiliation of a strong man. "I grieve to think that your highness is ill," he said, and made a reverence that was more insolent than courteous.

But Cæsar seemed resolved to take no offence, and he waved an apparently affable hand at his visitor. "I am grateful for your kindness," he said. "Say what you have to say."

Ugo appeared to swell with importance as he spoke. "I am the Pontiff's nephew," he said, "and what I say speaks my uncle's mind." He paused for a moment and looked with a leer of derision at the man who lay hunched up before him in the great chair. "Who would have thought," he said, with an air of great philosophy, "a little while ago that I,

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who was no more than a cardinal's nephew, should say to Cæsar, Hear this and do that, and that Cæsar would have to hear me and do my bidding?" He plumed himself as he spoke, strutting and swelling like a peacock in its pride.

Cæsar gave a great sigh. "Who would have thought it!" he muttered. He showed as one all abandoned to the misery of his position.

Ugo shrugged his shoulders, and spoke complacently: "Time is a weather-cock," he said. "The wind has been blowing Borgia for long enough, while many of us have whistled for a change in the weather. To-day, the saints be praised, it blows Rovere fair and straight. Will you hear the Pontiff's will?"

Cæsar, hunched cunningly in his great chair, grinned at his tormentor whimsically. The contrast would be amazing to any restrained mind between the ambling jackass gaudily caparisoned and the rugged lion that watched him with quiet eyes of scorn. But Cæsar said nothing. He only nodded agreement with Ugo's speech.

Ugo resumed: "His holiness, Pope Julius II.—"

Cæsar interrupted him: "Who?"

Ugo explained: "That is the title my uncle has taken on his elevation to the chair of St. Peter. His holiness, Pope Julius II., in his great clemency, gives you your life."

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Cæsar smiled grimly. "I am grateful for his goodness," he said.

"But," Ugo went on, "in your own interest, as well as in the interests of the state, he has decided to keep you in perpetual imprisonment in this very castle of St. Angelo."

There was a sudden flash in Cæsar's eyes that might have frightened Ugo if he had seen it, but it faded away as Cæsar said: "But if I refuse this, I can hold this castle for a long time against great odds."

Ugo smiled wickedly. "I think not, Cæsar," he said. "Even while I am speaking with you here your little handful of men, who know the news and the hopelessness of your case, are being talked over, won by the best argument in the world—gold."

Cæsar's grasp on the arms of his chair stiffened. "Is this so?" he asked, sternly.

Ugo nodded. "You have heard," he said, "the cries outside where the people are shouting, 'Death to Cæsar Borgia.' If you will listen now you will hear the same cry within your walls." And, indeed, as he said, there rose the clamor of voices outside the great door of the room, and that clamor shaped the words: "Death to Cæsar Borgia!" Cæsar's fighting-men were his friends no longer.

"That shows," Ugo said, "that the castle is in our hands. Your men are too sensible to fight against the odds you hold so lightly." He sneered

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maliciously. "Great Cæsar, I think we must call you Little Cæsar now."

While Ugo had been speaking, Cæsar's bearing seemed to grow momentarily feebler and more dejected. It looked to his taunter as if he were on the point of collapsing. Cæsar sighed heavily, as one that finds the burden of his cares too great. "Why, so you may," he admitted. "You stronger, younger men are too much for me. I hope you mean to be kind to me."

"Oh, we shall be very kind," Ugo promised, scornfully, gloating over his victim's abasement. "You shall have good food to eat and old wine to drink and fair mistresses to play with, and when we that are your conquerors feel in the mood for philosophic mirth we shall come and peep at your ease, and say to ourselves in wonder, 'This fellow once frightened Italy.'"

Cæsar sighed once again. "Every dog must have his day," he said, and his head drooped lower upon his breast. "I am not what I was; my sickness has weakened me more than I thought." He rose to his feet with a great show of effort. "Lend me, I pray you, your arm to the doorway."

Ugo looked at him curiously. "Wherefore?" he asked.

"I am minded," Cæsar answered, "to look upon the pleasant faces of those that were once my men

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and are now your men, and to be quite assured that my cause is ruined."

Ugo grinned malignly. "Your cause is ruined sure enough," he said. "You need have no doubt of that. But I will humor your fancy."

With a great air of condescension he offered Cæsar his arm, which Cæsar took and leaned on heavily. The pair moved slowly across the room, Cæsar hobbling painfully, and apparently in the last stage of exhaustion, until they came near the great door. Then came a swift and startling change. The sick man suddenly stiffened himself, and, quitting Ugo with alacrity, drove home the great iron bolts of the door. When this was done, Cæsar turned and faced the amazed Ugo.

"You pitiful fool," he said, contemptuously, "did you really think that you could cage the eagle?"

Ugo saw his danger, and drew back with a writhing face, screaming for help. He was young and strong, and Cæsar aged and weakened with illness, but he feared Cæsar.

Cæsar advanced toward him menacingly. "You baited me," he said, "as curs bait an Andalusian bull, but now and then the cur gets tossed."

Ugo still retreated, pleading for mercy, promising to use his influence with the new Pope.

Cæsar seemed to dash his words away with a violent gesture. "Damn him and you!" he cried. "He is out of my reach; you are in my clutches."

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You jeered at me briskly enough a moment ago. Where is your laughter now? I hope you will seem merry when I show you to your friends."

As Cæsar spoke he continued his stealthy advance on Ugo, and Ugo, seeking desperately for a chance of escape, slowly retreated before him. Seeing no way of avoiding the pursuit of Cæsar, Ugo suddenly mustered the courage to pluck his dagger from its sheath and flung himself on Cæsar, hoping to find him sufficiently weakened to fall an easy victim to his attack. But he found himself clasped in an iron grip. Rage and despair had re-kindled in Cæsar's stricken limbs something of their old strength. He snatched the dagger from Ugo, and dragged the struggling wretch toward the window. There he leaned out, still holding Ugo in his strong hands, and looked down upon the raging mob below. As before, when those in the open space caught sight of their enemy, they screamed at him their cry of hate: "Death to Cæsar Borgia!" But now, when they saw that another figure struggled in his grasp, they guessed this to be some enemy to Cæsar, some friend to them, and they yelled ferociously.

Cæsar laughed at them fiercely. "Do you howl at Cæsar, beasts?" he said. "Take this gift from Cæsar!" With a violent effort he dragged the struggling Ugo to the edge of the parapet and made to cast him upon the staring, screaming crowd be-

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low. But there was a great brazier on the parapet, its iron column firmly bedded in the stone. Ugo caught at this and clung to it blindly, trying to keep his feet on the coping, trying to resist the furious pushes of Cæsar. Cæsar, finding that he could not force the clinging fingers to relax their grip, drew his dagger and hacked at Ugo's wrists. In another bloody moment the wretched man's grasp yielded, and he fell through empty space, turning as he fell. Shrieks of horror and howls of execration greeted this deed; but Cæsar, paying no further heed to his falling victim, sheathed his wet weapon, brushed his hands together as if to shake off the contamination of Ugo's touch, and, hurriedly quitting the window, advanced to the room where Lavinella waited him and opened the door.



## VI

### BANDA-BRUTUS

“COME quickly, Lavinella!” Cæsar commanded, and Lavinella came out of the room. She had seen nothing, heard nothing, of what had passed. Cæsar made as if to clasp her in his arms. “Fortune,” he cried, “gives good and bad in the same hour! If she refuses me my pope, she yields me my woman. Lavinella, in finding you again I find new love and new life.”

Lavinella strove vainly to extricate herself from his impassioned clasp. “Alexander,” she wailed, “you have found love too late. I loved you while I was your paramour, but now I am the bride of a heavenly Groom, and even to Cæsar Borgia I must refuse my love.”

Cæsar laughed derisively. “I am still Cæsar Borgia,” he answered, “and neither gods nor men shall keep me from my own. You are my life, you are my star, you are my good-fortune. When I lost you, I lost the world; in finding you, I win again both earth and heaven.”



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"Cæsar!" Lavinella cried, "Cæsar! I am given to God!"

"Given by God," Cæsar answered, "who took you from me to give you back again to me just when my fortunes seem at their worst, to bid them rise again. We will fly together into a future that shall be far more famous than the past."

Lavinella shook her head. "You must go alone," she said. "I will stay here to pray for your soul."

Cæsar still encompassed her with his arms. "Can you be so cold," he asked—"you, who were so sweet a mistress? My little Lavinella of the trees, think of our love-hours in the garden, and fly with your scholar-lover."

Lavinella moaned: "I must stay here."

Cæsar frowned. "You must think me strangely changed if you brave me in this manner. I say I love you, and when Cæsar loves he must be beloved."

Lavinella sighed: "I love you, Cæsar; no man has ever been better loved by woman. But I have vowed my soul to Heaven, and I must stay here, for I am given to God."

"Then," Cæsar answered, calmly, "I will pluck the gift from God's altar with my own hands."

He took up his great sword, which lay on a table hard by, and girdled it about him. Outside, the shouts increased; a whole world seemed to be call-

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ing, "Death to the Borgia!" Cæsar caught Lavinella up, and drew her helpless toward the picture of Alexander VI. He touched a spring, and the picture swung back, disclosing an aperture in the wall.

"Safety lies this way!" Cæsar cried, and advanced toward the opening, dragging Lavinella after him; but even as he was about to cross the threshold Michelotto appeared in the vacant space. Cæsar paused, amazed, staring at the man he had forgotten. "Michelotto," he murmured.

Michelotto looked at him cruelly. "I was sure you would take this way," he said, grimly. Then he entered the room, and behind him came six figures, all cloaked in black.

Cæsar marvelled at them: "Why are you here?"

Michelotto pointed to his companions. "These gentlemen desire that you should know them."

"To what end?" Cæsar asked.

Michelotto pointed to each of his companions in turn. "This is the Lord of Lucumo, whose wife you shamed. This is the Lord of Colonna, whose sire you slew. This is the Lord of Savelli, whom you made childless in a night. This is the Lord of Pitigliano, whose sister died of your kindness. This is Pandolfo Orsini."

As Michelotto named each of his companions, the man named stripped off his black mantle and showed himself armed with sword and dagger.

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There was yet one that remained cloaked. From him Michelotto plucked his robe and revealed the trembling figure and alarmed face of Banda Benvoglio.

Banda wailed piteously. "Cæsar," he said, "they made me come!"

Cæsar laughed scornfully at the sight. "You are all welcome, friends," he said, "but I cannot stay to do you honor."

Michelotto did not move. "We have come to kill you, Cæsar," he said. "Those that howl for you outside the walls are no more than common butchers, with a common rage against a tyrant, but these lords and I have private hates that can only be gratified by our private hands."

Cæsar mocked him: "Your hands are not the hands to slaughter Cæsar."

Up to this moment Lavinella had crouched motionless, stricken silent with horror. But now she found energy to move and speak. She flung herself on her knees in entreaty. "Spare him!—for Heaven's pity, spare him!" she pleaded.

Pandolfo frowned on her. "You plead, who sought to slay him?"

Lavinella denied it. "I never did so," she protested. She began to scream wildly: "Help! help for Cæsar!—help!"

Michelotto caught hold of her. "Madonna Lavinella," he said, "you had better stand on one

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side, for they will kill you if you plead for him." As he spoke he dragged her to the oratory and pushed her inside it, shutting the doors upon her. She turned and clung to the gilded railing, shaking it in her unavailing efforts to break through.

Cæsar faced his enemies, composedly awaiting their attack, and his composure seemed to make their hatred hesitate. Suddenly he pointed to the dark space behind his enemies, calling out: "You are betrayed! See, behind you!"

The conspirators, taken unawares, involuntarily looked round. As they did so, Cæsar, with a mighty effort, dragged a great table before him and overturned it, so that it formed an intrenchment, behind which he could fight to advantage.

He drew his great sword. "Now," he cried, "who is hot to die by Cæsar's hand?"

"Kill him!" Michelotto screamed, and the conspirators charged on Cæsar, while Banda discreetly concealed himself behind the curtain near the window. There was a rapid passage of arms, and then the conspirators were compelled to fall back, leaving Luigi and Silvio dead on the floor.

Cæsar, who had gained new strength from the scuffle, shouted defiantly, "A Borgia!—a Borgia!"

Again Michelotto urged his companions to the attack, and now there came the sound of heavy

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blows beating against the closed doors of the room.

Michelotto cried out, "Break down the door, friends!" and the sound of the blows increased, and some of the panels began to split beneath the strokes of axes; but the strong door, strongly bolted, still resisted the attack.

Cæsar, now full of hope and fight, leaped across the table and drove the conspirators before him. "Make way for me!" he cried. "How many wolves will dare to face the lion?"

He struck down Michelotto, and fought his way to the secret stair, his scattered, reduced enemies recoiling before his unconquerable sword; but even at the moment when escape seemed certain for him, Banda, emerging from his concealment, stabbed Cæsar in the back.

Cæsar reeled under the unexpected blow. "Ah! viper at my heel!" he cried, and turned to strike at Banda. As he did so, the others closed in upon him, stabbing him, wondering at their courage, rejoicing in their luck.

"This for my sire!" Prospero cried, and thrust his sword into Cæsar's side.

"This is for my wife!" cried Ilario, and stabbed Cæsar.

"Take this for the Orsini!" said Pandolfo, stabbing him.

Cæsar reeled and fell to the ground, gashed with

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wounds. Banda struck the last stroke. "This is for my gold!" he cried, triumphantly. "I shall be called Brutus now!"

"I have it," Cæsar muttered, and said no more.

Lavinella, clinging to the doors of the oratory, kept screaming, "Let me in! let me in!"

The great door began at last to yield under the strokes of its assailants, the wood-work splintering, the hinges yielding, steel edges of pikes and axes appearing through the rent wood. Pandolfo turned to his friends. "We have done our business," he said. "It is best for us to go. Rovere may pretend anger at our deed, though he will be grateful enough for it."

Pandolfo, Prospero, and Ilario went out by way of the secret passage, followed by Banda, who tried to whistle as he went, but made a poor thing of his effort. Michelotto, fatally wounded, lay upon the floor. The clamor of Lavinella's entreaties moved him in his agony. He raised his head and looked at her. "Do you love him still?" he asked, piteously; and then, dragging himself painfully over the floor to the oratory door, lifted himself to his knee and opened it, allowing Lavinella to enter the room. When he had done so he dropped on his face and died.

Lavinella flung herself on Cæsar's body. "Cæsar, my Cæsar!" she cried.

Cæsar looked up at her with dim eyes and spoke

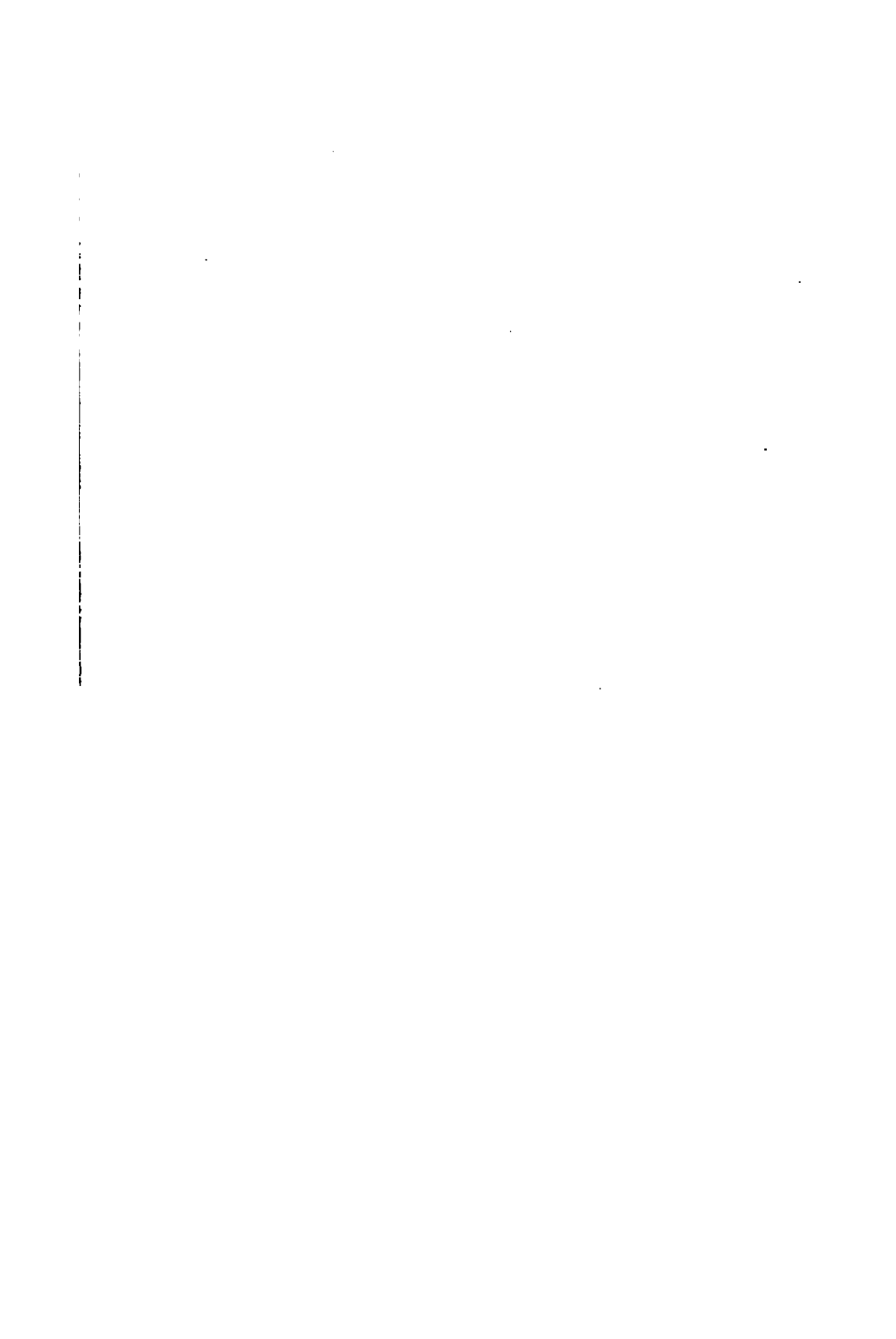
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faintly. "I should have been immortal," he gasped. He found strength for a great wailing cry: "Italy! Italy!" Then he said no more. And when the door was broken open those that entered found Lavinella bending over the dead body of Cæsar Borgia.

THE END







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### The gorgeous Borgia

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